

# ASHA

Final Manuscript

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## Prologue

### How I Came to Write this Story

At night on back-alley streets, big-flowered fabrics glow in the windows of thousands of homes across the United States. The fabrics are not curtains, or window shades, or bed sheets that have been tacked over windows for privacy. They're wall drapes, wide swaths of fabric that wrap around the entire homes of Somali Bantu immigrants, the largest group of African refugees that's ever resettled in the United States. Their former homes in Somalia were generally unseen by society, but their American windows are illuminated by brilliant reds and purples and oranges, colors that pop and wow and trumpet.

One row house in Pittsburgh, Pa., has pink drapes imprinted with red flowers the size of mangoes and fronds that curl in myriad directions. Every evening, the back-lit fabric animates two second-story windows in an otherwise muted block of brick row homes. Inside, the pink drapes cloak the entire living room, covering the walls and windows from floor to ceiling, giving the chamber a tent-like feel.

A teenage girl named Asha lives there. The tent-room is where she serves bowls of rice or noodles to her father, hunches over a coffee table to scratch guesses on her homework, breaks up fights between her five younger siblings, and where she sometimes flirts with boys on MySpace. This tent-room is where she tries to make sense of who she is, just like any teenage girl. It's where she tries to figure out what it means to live in the United States as a young, Black, Muslim woman.

I've visited Asha in this pink tent-room nearly every week for three years. It's a layered room, where not only the walls are covered in fabric, but the floors and couches, too. In the middle where Asha's baby brothers play, an extra throw rug covers the carpet. Along the perimeter of the room, a love seat and a couch are both covered in bed sheets that Asha's mother embroidered with yarn. In the corner sits a large dining table that has never once been used for dining (the family prefers to eat out of one bowl on the floor, or on the coffee table near the couches). Instead, the table holds a television, a stereo, and an alarm clock in the shape of a mosque that sometimes blares Muslim prayers. Next to a computer, a mantle displays extra drinking glasses and plastic flowers. The tent-room is thickly scented with the oils that Asha uses to cook chicken and vegetables. This is the room where she tells me stories of her past, struggles of the present, and hopes for the future.

Asha's story is the sort of tale that I wanted to write even before I met her. After all, the term *refugee* automatically implies a journey and a story of someone running from danger. There are so many questions to ask: Why are you in danger? What happened? Are you safe now?

Some of the world's most famous stories are about refugees. There's the Biblical Moses and his Hebrew followers escaping the Egyptians through the fissured Red Sea; the Puritans fleeing British persecution to the Americas on the *Mayflower*; or the "boat people" making their way to the U.S. after the Vietnam War.

The word "refugee" was coined in the 17th-century when Huguenots—French Protestants—fled France because of persecution. For some time, the 1598 Edict of Nantes had allowed them to peacefully practice their minority religion. Then King Louis XIV revoked the edict in 1685 and threatened to punish anyone who was not Catholic. The French called the Huguenots "réfugiés" because they were seeking asylum, or refuge, elsewhere.

In 2005, I was first introduced to the story of Somali Bantu refugees when my editor at *Pitt Magazine* gave me a May 8 article from the local *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* newspaper. She often shares examples of potent storytelling that she wants to emulate in the magazine. The article, "Reversal of Fortune," was about two Somali refugee women who had reunited in Pittsburgh. It began like this:

*The two women's paths never crossed in their homeland—and if they had, it would not have been in friendship.*

*Fadumo Abshir was at the top level of society in Somalia, and Ralia Derow was at the bottom. Sharing a meal or discussing their children would have been unthinkable.*

*But war, widowhood and displacement brought the two mothers equally low. They wound up as neighbors in a refugee camp in Kenya, where hardship dissolved their differences. Struggling to keep themselves and their children alive, they became friends.*

The story goes on to chronicle how the women helped each other in the refugee camps, how they were separated but reunited at another camp, and how the once-rich Fadumo struggled when she came to the United States. Ralia, a low-class Somali Bantu, had also moved to the States but had more success. She invited Fadumo to move into her Pittsburgh home and even paid the bus fare to bring her there. The story ended as beautifully as it began:

*War, the women agree, is like fire. It eats everything in its path, and those who survive are scarred forever.*

*But mothers need to keep going for the sake of their children. And if, amid the ashes, an unlikely friendship should take root, even those who feel as if they've lost everything might find themselves with something after all.*

Wow. That's the sort of friendship everyone wants to have, I thought when I finished reading. The tale of cross-cultural, cross-class friendship made me think I should develop some new friendships of my own. At the end of the article, a small advertisement called for volunteers to help refugee women like Fadumo and Ralia adjust to American life. Yes, I wanted to volunteer.

I was familiar with accommodating people from other countries, as well as receiving generous hospitality from people in other nations (a free multi-course dinner and beer at a back-alley restaurant in Beijing when my bank cards didn't work comes to mind). My father works for an international bank and when I was growing up in Western

New York, we occasionally took his coworkers from around the world on tours of Buffalo and Niagara Falls. We told them stories of our region—how Buffalo was the first city with an electric grid on account of Niagara Falls powering the electric turbines. Sometimes they shared stories about life in China or Korea. One woman gave me a present, a delicate Korean doll with a silk dress and a little platform for her to perch on. Although I couldn't carry the little Korean lady around like a Cabbage Patch kid, she was one of my most cherished dolls because she had a story. This doll had a journey from an unknown land across the globe and I used to imagine what her life was like in Korea.

Six months after reading the “Reversal of Fortune” article, I signed up to volunteer with refugees who were resettling in Pittsburgh. I imagined that it would be a way to exchange stories, in the way that my family exchanged stories with my father's coworkers. The refugees might impart tales of their past, and I could explain the stories about their new home. I didn't know if I would be paired with Somali Bantus or Iraqi or Burmese refugees. Really, it didn't matter to me. All of them would have stories and all of them would need guidance in their new American city.

Getting to know local refugees would also help me to experience the greatest story of the United States—the immigrant story. I could see myself playing a tiny role in their journey, which presumably arched from normalcy in their homeland, to untold suffering, to boredom in temporary camps, to moving abroad, to adapting to a new way of life. This was an immigrant story, something my relatives and teachers had talked about but I had only vaguely experienced.

My great-aunt often reminded my cousins and me that our grandfather had come to the U.S. to strive for a better life. She said he had worked hard to provide for his

children, and us, his grandchildren. In her stories of their emigration from Prince Edward Island, Canada, she demanded that we never take his immigrant up-by-the-bootstraps work ethic for granted. There are other more distant ancestors in my family who emigrated from Ireland and Scotland, too. Volunteering with refugees, I hoped, would be a way to give back to my family, to show that I appreciated our family narrative. It would be a way for me to understand complexities of the American Dream, that trope of grand adventure and success.

Through Pittsburgh's Catholic Charities Refugee Services program, I was assigned to mentor two Somali Bantu families, a surprising 20 people in all. Asha is one of seven children, and the other family, which once lived next door to Asha's family, has 11 children. Through getting to know these 20 people, all with their own quirks and personalities, I've learned a little bit about how difficult it is to adjust to a new society—especially when you've only transferred from the bottom of one to the bottom of another.

The term Somali Bantu is a charged word—a term coined by humanitarian aid workers in Kenya to lump together a diverse population of minority groups that had escaped to Kenya during Somalia's civil war in the early 1990s. Most of the Somali Bantu are from a "Bantu" class that originally entered Somalia two hundred years ago as slaves from southern Africa. After escaping from slavery, they settled in the Jubba River Valley, where they were generally isolated from the rest of the Somali population and preserved many of the stories, dances, languages, and cultural practices from their Bantu homelands of modern-day Mozambique, Congo, and Tanzania. Some people consider the word "Bantu" to have a derogatory connotation because it often indicates a group of oppressed people.



Once, when I asked Asha what her people call themselves, and if there is another term besides “Somali Bantu” that she prefers, she seemed confused.

“I am Somali Bantu,” she said. “That’s what I am.” For a girl who was born a refugee camp in Kenya where the workers called her Somali Bantu, that became her identity. And so, I continue to use the term Somali Bantu throughout this book.

In their tent-rooms, the Somali Bantus have taught me the importance of family (hearing six sisters giggling while washing their faces before bed makes me wish I had more than one sister to enjoy life with) and they’ve taught me the importance of slowing down (sometimes it’s nice to stay awhile and enjoy *ugali* porridge bread). The families have also asked me hilarious questions about American culture, usually related to weird shows they saw on TV, (“Why do Americans cry when a dog dies?”) and have been total pains in the asses (throwing away books or calendars or clothes that I’ve brought them).

When I began to write down some of their stories, I focused on the women in the families who decorate their tent-rooms with such flair. I also wrote about other female community volunteers who have spent considerable time and effort in helping Somali Bantus to adjust to the particulars of housing, education, and work. Throughout history, women have been the primary undertakers of acculturation programs in the United States. This is a book about women who are, as immigrants or helpers, a part of America’s refugee-immigrant narrative.

Another reason why I decided to write about women was to tilt the imbalance (ever so slightly) in the canon of literature and film about refugees. Although the “Reversal of Fortune” story focuses on two women, I discovered in further reading about Somali Bantu immigrants and African immigrants in general, that the stories usually

focus on men. The same is true in film documentaries. Some of the gender difference is likely a result of language discrepancies, since far more African-immigrant men have learned English than women. Some of it is also because women have been institutionally swept into the margins. The resettlement agencies that have brought the Lost Boys to the United States, for example, often forget to mention that there are girls included in that group of young, Sudanese refugees.

Of all the Somali Bantus I know, Asha is one of the most outgoing girls. She's willing to take risks. This has led her into some trouble, but it's helped her to keep pushing for better chances and better opportunities in this often-confusing world. Sometimes she tells stories that don't reflect factual events, but how she was feeling at the time. Sometimes she tells stories to just flat-out lie and get what she wants. In this book, I've tried to stay true to how Asha sees her world, how she perceives her life in the United States.

## Chapter 1

### Solar Flares

The body-piercing salon is one block ahead. Slowly, Asha and her mother and her sister shuffle in their flip-flops toward Flying Monkey Tattoos & Piercings. The three women have talked about this errand for months and are eager to visit the piercing parlor. Yet even though they're excited, they don't see any reason to rush. Patience is how they managed to migrate to the United States in the first place. So, like always, they stroll.

Wearing colorful dresses and chiffon headscarves that are so vibrant they could've been dyed with solar flares, the daughters and mother look like florescent

nomads drifting through a hipster neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pa. It's a muggy summer evening and they gradually make their way past parking meters and A-frame signs advertising cheap vintage records or domestic beers. East Carson Street is caught in a tame lull between happy hour and nightlife, yet the leisurely bicyclists, drivers, and walkers seem to whiz by these Muslim women of eastern Africa who always root one foot onto the ground before raising the other.

Occasionally, the bright blue scarf that's draped over Asha's head flutters when hot breezes push through the corridor of Victorian storefronts. At 14 years old, she already moves with a deliberate adult poise. She's wearing one of her favorite dresses, or *diracs*, patterned with hot red spirals, a loose chemise that flows around her thickset build. Her face and cheeks are round with chubby cuteness.

Scuffling a few paces behind Asha is her mother, Mame-Asha. (In many African cultures, including Somali Bantu culture, calling a woman Mame is a way of formally addressing her, like Mrs. in the United States. However, instead of taking on a family name, the mothers will take on the names of their children. Hence, Asha's mother is Mame-Asha.) She spent most of the day on her couch again, staring listlessly ahead, eyes wobbling in a sickly haze, but she appears to have come out of the spell for now. Her face is relaxed, but still firm with square cheeks and weathered skin that make her look more like 50 than 33. Although much of her frame is hidden in her loose dirac fashioned with orange and blue checkers, it's apparent that she has a short-and-stout build, too. Her hair is wrapped tightly in a black-and-red scarf, and a blazing yellow scarf is draped loosely over her head and shoulders.

At an intersection without a crosswalk, she and Asha hesitate while vehicles glide by. When there's a break in traffic, they shuffle across the street at their same unhurried pace, and approaching cars have to pause and brake.

Tottering next to Mame-Asha is 11-year-old Zeynab, whose sparkly maroon headscarf is tied like a ponytail at the back of her head, giving her a gypsy-like aura. A skinny kid with rangy legs who prefers T-shirts and long skirts to the wrap-dresses that her mother wears, she looks like she's on the verge of breaking from tradition and sprinting down the sidewalk, but she's weighed down by her infant brother on her back. He's tied to her with another scarf and the top of his head is barely visible. While Zeynab patters by Mame-Asha, she twists her Mardi Gras-style necklaces into loops, admiring the beads with distracted girlishness. She was wary of coming on this body-piercing errand because, well, it might hurt. She's not sure. Her mother insisted that it wouldn't hurt at all.

Pain or not, Asha is ready for the parlor. She wants to look beautiful for an upcoming wedding and a sparkle in her nose will certainly add some flair. At the wedding, she'll be shaking in the dance line for single attendees, mostly teen men and women who are ready to have their marriages planned. The dancing will be filmed and copied to VHS tapes that will be passed around to Somali Bantu immigrants in some 50 U.S. cities. So she wants to look her best for her family and possible suitors in Colorado or Ohio or Arizona who may be watching.

Though she'd like to win suitors' admirations with her beauty, she's a little wary of the whole marriage thing. Fortunately U.S. law prohibits her from marrying until she's 16. (When Mame-Asha was Asha's age, she was already married and pregnant.) So at the

very least, Asha still has two years to wait. Which is fine with her. For the wedding, she's just looking forward to dancing with her girlfriends and getting dressed in her best jewelry, which will hopefully include a gem stud in her nose.

"*Y-e-a-h*, we need to get our noses pierced," has been Asha's refrain for several months. Her mother, Mame-Asha, who speaks little English, has been repeating a simpler refrain: "Nose, nose." Tonight, I finally had time to take the women out to the piercing parlor. I've known the family for more than a year, since I began volunteering with a refugee resettlement program in Pittsburgh. As the American in the group, I'm wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

Finally, after a long saunter from my car that's parked a block away, we reach the Flying Monkey salon. Inside, air conditioning and punk rock are blaring. The walls are papered from floor to ceiling with loopy tattoo designs. Glass cabinets glint with hundreds of rings, studs, and flesh plugs. Behind a curtain, the electric *Zzzzzzzz* of a tattoo needle buzzes loudly. Asha, Mame-Asha, and Zeynab—with the bump of baby Ebra on her back—weave past black leather couches and glance at the jewelry in the cabinets.

"They're interested in getting their noses pierced," I say to a spike-faced clerk at the back counter, waving my arm toward my three Somali companions. The scarves draped over Mame-Asha's and Asha's heads look oddly similar to the yellow scarf in an über Virgin Mary tattoo design on the wall.

"How much does it cost?" I ask, which was the first question Mame-Asha and Asha asked when I suggested we go on this nose-piercing errand.

“Thirty dollars and that includes jewelry,” he replies, crossing his forearms and leaning on the counter. His earlobes are stretched with large plugs that look like plastic bottle caps. To me, he looks like an edgy electric bass player who enjoys ironically mocking mainstream American life from the fringes. To the Somali women, he looks like the forest people in eastern Africa who were known for their generosity to women and children who were trying to escape from warring militias. The forest people, as Mame-Asha has called them, decorated themselves with piercings and body paint, too.

“Thirty dollars,” I say, repeating the cost of a nose piercing the women. They’re standing at a distance, about 15 feet away.

“I need to see IDs. They have to be sixteen,” the clerk says, looking at flat-chested Zeynab and making it clear that he’s certain she’s not old enough. “But everyone has to show ID for the forms.”

“ID,” I say to the women. Amina digs into her purse, pulling out billing envelopes with plastic windows and social security cards, hoping one of the items is correct. I open my wallet and pull out my driver’s license and show it to her. She doesn’t have a license—only a Pennsylvania ID since she’s never driven a car in her life—but the two cards look similar.

“Ah,” she says, raising her chin in acknowledgement and shoving her hand back in her black bag.

“Well, what if their mother signs a paper if they’re younger than 16?” I ask the clerk about the age-sixteen rule while Mame-Asha is trying to find her ID. “She wants everyone to get it done.”

“Nope, we do not pierce anyone younger than sixteen, even if their parents want it. State law. You have to get parental permission at sixteen. After you’re eighteen, you can do whatever you want.”

“You have to be sixteen,” I say to the women, primarily to Asha who often translates from English to Swahili or Kizigua or Maay-Maay, whichever language is most appropriate for the moment.

“Sixteen?” Asha asks.

“Yeah.”

“I am sixteen,” she says.

“No, you’re not,” I whisper. I can’t remember if she’s fourteen or fifteen, but I’m certain she isn’t sixteen.

“Yes, I am. You tell them I am sixteen,” she says, pulling her blue scarf against her round cheeks and smiling in a sly way.

“But I can’t just tell them. You have to have an ID to show it.”

“Can you show them this one?” she asks, grabbing the ID Mame-Asha has finally found.

“No, they will know it’s her, not you,” I say, amused that she’s trying to use her mother’s ID as a fake. “They will know you were not born in 1974. You can’t use that.”

Then I turn to Mame-Asha. “Asha, Zeynab: No,” I say, while shaking my head. “Sixteen. Sixteen.” Then Asha explains to her mother in better detail why she and her sister can’t get their noses pierced.

“Ah?” Mame-Asha says, raising her voice in disbelief. In her world, nose piercing is a common beauty statement, about as ordinary as piercing a girl’s ears, and forcing



women to wait until after they're old enough to be married seems stupid. In the Jubba River Valley of Somalia where she grew up, people don't keep track of their ages by specific dates and years, but by whether you're strong enough to work on the farm, or pubescent enough to get married, or old enough to choose spouses for your children and grandchildren. In Mame-Asha's opinion, her daughters are plenty old enough to have their noses pierced.

Before we leave, I ask Mame-Asha if she wants to get her nose pierced here when she's doesn't have to breastfeed baby Ebra anymore. Asha translates the question and they discuss it for a bit. A few months ago, another American volunteer named Sally attempted to take Mame-Asha to get her nose pierced, but the body piercer wouldn't do it when she saw baby Ebra with Mame-Asha. She claimed that it was too dangerous for a breastfeeding woman to get a piercing because an infection could be damaging to the baby. So, this evening Mame-Asha knew she wasn't going to get her nose pierced, but she wanted her daughters to get it done. In a few days, when doctors finally diagnose the cause of her occasional fatigue and eye-wobbling, it turns out to be a very good thing that she didn't try to get around the no-breastfeeding rule like Asha attempted to get around the age-rule. The blood loss could've knocked her into a coma or worse.

"How much does it cost?" Asha asks.

"Thirty dollars," I repeat. Mame-Asha makes a face of disgust on translation, knotting her thick eyebrows and crunching her nose.

"She say it is too much money," Asha says. "Let's go. We go to another place." Indeed, thirty dollars is a lot for their budget. Since Mame-Asha birthed Ebra and she quit her job at the laundry, the family has been eeking by on their father's minimum-wage

janitor salary. In addition to the girls and their infant brother, there are three young boys: 7-year-old Ali, 5-year-old Hamadi, and 2-year-old Hussein.

The family is part of the 12,500 Somali Bantu refugees who were resettled to the United States in 2003 through 2005. The Somali Bantus are a minority group from Somalia, a group of ex-slaves who were marginalized from mainstream society and discriminated against through some of the same methods that African Americans have been discriminated against in the United States. When the Somali government collapsed in 1991 and the country dissolved into a civil war (to this day, a stable government still hasn't been formed), they fled to nearby Kenya. There, they remained in refugee camps until the United States accepted them for resettlement. Although Asha and Zeynab tell people that they're from Somalia, both of them were born in the Kenyan refugee camps and have only been to Somalia through their mother's stories.

On the ride home to the family's row house in Pittsburgh's Manchester neighborhood, Mame-Asha lays her head on the back seat and closes her eyes. Her head lolls with the curves of the road as she leans against the side of Ebra's car seat. He's sleeping, too. Zeynab sits on the other side of the car seat, barely tall enough to see out the window. Asha is sitting in the front seat, playing with the radio buttons, searching for hip-hop music. The car is thickly perfumed with the vegetable oil that the women rub into their skin.

"Do you want to stop and buy some medicine? Or any food?" I ask Asha. "Does your mother need anything?"

“Mame,” Asha calls her mother. In the backseat, Mame-Asha half-opens her eyes. Then Asha speaks to her in Kizigua. Mame-Asha mumbles something and closes her eyes again.

“She say she don’t have the card or checks,” Asha explains, referring to the ACCESS card she has for the Pennsylvania food stamp program, and the checks she receives for milk and eggs through the state Women Infant and Children (WIC) program. “She want to go home.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “She seems sick. I can buy something.”

“Every night, she cry,” Asha explains about her mother’s mood and symptoms. “She cry because she never see her mother and father again.” Mame-Asha’s parents and some of her siblings are still living in Somalia and although she’s wired enough money for the family to build new homes, she will likely never return. I wonder if serious depression is the cause for her health symptoms. Usually so industrious, Mame-Asha has been alarming her family by lying down for hours, almost days at a time. Her breastmilk hasn’t been sufficient for Ebra, and doctors have urged her to substitute some of his feedings with baby formula.

Asha finally gets the radio to the 96.1 rap station.

“So how’s school, Asha?” I ask, while we drive past grand-porch Victorian homes—some rehabbed, some warped—in the family’s Manchester neighborhood. Recently, she was kicked out of summer school for fighting. I heard the news from Sally, the other American volunteer who tried to get Mame-Asha’s nose pierced. Sally is also a lawyer who negotiates disputes between schools and families. Many of her clients are Somali Bantu refugees. Fighting at school is not the sort of behavior that’s going to help

Asha attend college, a goal that she occasionally announces (“I will go to college.”). I’m curious to hear Asha’s side of the story about her dismissal.

“Good,” she says in response to my school question. After a pause: “I don’t go anymore.”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Because I was in the bathroom. And this Black girl, she was trying to look here,” she says, leaning forward in the bucket seat of the car and pointing up the hem of her red-swirl dress. Although Asha’s skin is black, too, she doesn’t call herself Black. She calls herself African. She associates the term Black with African Americans. At school and on the bus, tension between Black Americans and African immigrants has been heated.

“Wait, this girl was trying to look up your skirt?” I ask.

“*Y-e-a-h*, she was trying to look at me. And I tell her, I tell her, you get away from me. You are crazy. So we fight. And then they say that we can’t go back to school anymore.”

“Sorry that happened, no one should look up your skirt,” I say. “Make sure you tell Sally that.” She might be able to press harassment charges. Asha also has a tendency to lie or exaggerate, so her story might not be completely accurate. In any case, for a girl who grew up in a refugee camp where physical violence is a common method of dealing with problems, it’s been hard for her to learn to ignore teasing from other students. Sure, she listens politely when Sally or I or her schoolteachers or principals explain that she should ignore the other students (so as not to encourage their behavior), and simply tell an adult who can better deal with the problem. But Asha doesn’t like to wait around and have her pride hurt. She’s always ready with a “fuck you” or a shove.

After we pass an elementary school, I turn left at a stop sign and park on a small, one-way street next to the family's brick row house. Their house is on the end of a series of six row homes that have gold lanterns hanging beside their green doors, and iron railings that curl down the stairs leading to a brick sidewalk. Together, the row house block looks something like a novelistic construction of 19th-century London, a place of great expectations. Across the street, there's an unkempt lot and forgotten house, ivy curtaining its boarded windows. Next door, there's another overgrown field with abandoned tires or rusty metal scraps.

Out of the car, Zeynab hustles up the concrete porch steps, holding Ebra on her hip. Mame-Asha follows, tiredly. The end of her yellow scarf glides over the metal railing. I promise Asha that I'll take her to the piercing parlor when she turns sixteen.

"Ok," Asha says, while holding Ebra's car seat by the top handle. "But maybe I can do it. *Y-e-a-h*, you just put something in," she says, digging her fingernail into the side of her nose. I will do that."

## Chapter 2

### Alarms

Two days later, four smoke alarms screech like sirens in Asha's house, echoing and wa-wa-ing around all the rooms. They've been sounding off for hours. To escape the ear-piercing beeps, Asha has taken Zeynab and her four younger brothers outside to play in a parking lot that serves as a backyard for their stretch of brick row houses. Only her parents remain inside.

In the hallway near the kitchen, Asha's father, Chechaka-Asha, looks up at a smoke alarm on the ceiling and ponders what to do. (Like Mame-Asha, he is referred to

by the formal Chechaka, which is something akin to referring to a man as Mr. in the the U.S.) He's wearing 80s-style stonewashed jeans and a white T-shirt pulled over his gut that's grown larger with each passing year in the United States. He has a boyish-looking face with gentle features.

"They keep going and going," he says in frustration, sweat beading on lines near his temples. "I don't know why." He opens the fuse box in the wall and switches some of the circuits off, but nothing happens.

"Have you changed the batteries?" I ask. "Sometimes they go off when the batteries are low. Do you have any extra batteries?"

"No, no batteries," he says, shaking his head.

"Do you want to go get some now?" I ask.

"Ya," he says reluctantly, then walks barefoot through the pink tent room and up the stairs toward the bedrooms. I assume he's going to find shoes. The house has three levels. There's a square foyer on the ground floor that leads directly to a narrow staircase. On the second level, visitors are deposited in a small kitchen. To the right, there's a toilet room and a bedroom attached to a fire escape that leads to the backyard parking lot. To the left is the tent room, the central room in the house. Stairs shooting out of the tent room lead to a full bathroom and two more bedrooms on the third floor.

Before coming to Pittsburgh in July 2005, Asha's family had only ever lived in one-room abodes, cozy houses or tents with a single room for sleeping, playing, birthing babies, or making love. Usually, cooking was done in small outdoor courtyards, and communal bathrooms were a walk away. On their first night in their row house, they all slept on the floor in the tent room, which was a stark room with white walls at the time.

They'd always slept together as a family and it was more comfortable that way. Now, it's July 2007 and they've been living in the house for two years. The sisters and brothers sleep in separate bedrooms now.

While I wait for Chechaka-Asha, I notice that Mame-Asha is splayed across a couch in the tent room. She's not wearing a headscarf and her hair is sticking straight out in an afro the shape of a rectangle. It's hot. And the alarms are piercing, making any relaxation on the couch seem impossible.

This is the first time I've ever seen her hair and it strikes me as a bad sign—an indication that she doesn't care about anything right now. Normally, she wears a headscarf even when she's sleeping. Married women are supposed to cover their hair at all times. In Somali Bantu culture, there are special ways to tie headscarves to indicate marital status or the significance of certain occasions. But to not wear one at all—well it's like when my grandmother reached a point in her dementia when she didn't care if she wore pantyhose anymore. My family knew then that she'd given up on life. Based on what Asha told me during the attempted nose-piercing trip last night, I wonder if Mame-Asha is seriously depressed.

"Are you ok?" I shout over the alarms.

She rolls and glances at me with vacant eyes and offers a limp hand for a shake.

"Fine, fine," she says. "Sleeping, sleeping."

"Ok," I say, understanding that she wants me to leave her alone, but still worried about her condition. Chechaka-Asha comes downstairs in black sneakers and we head down to the front stoop.



Outside, an African man wearing khaki pants rises from a stoop three doors down and comes over to shake hands with Chechaka-Asha. They chat together in Swahili. The man, Chechaka-Sarah, just moved into one of the row homes this week with his wife and five children. He's from Burundi, by way of a refugee camp in Tanzania. He escaped from Burundi in the mid-'90s when fighting erupted between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups—the same ethnic groups that were in conflict during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. On the sidewalk, we can still hear the beeps of smoke alarms inside Chechaka-Asha's place.

The brick row homes are owned and maintained by Pittsburgh's Catholic Charities organization, a subsidiary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Conference is one of the primary organizations that the U.S. State Department contracts with for the resettlement of refugees. Through its Catholic Charities organizations across the nation, the Conference coordinates housing, job support, and English language classes for incoming refugees.

In Pittsburgh, most refugees are given housing in Prospect Park, a large apartment complex with multiple buildings that could be considered a "refugee campus." There's a mini-mart within walking distance and the T subway line to downtown is nearby. Social workers and volunteers regularly visit the campus to teach English classes or to help people with taxes or to coordinate soccer leagues for kids on the green lawns. However, the housing complex is nearly full and, in recent years, the town and school district where Prospect Park is located have been complaining of being overloaded by the influx of foreigners.

So, Catholic Charities began seeking out other properties. They refurbished the Manchester Block row homes and have placed a few families there, including Chechaka-Asha and Chechaka-Sarah. There's also a family of Turkmenistan Muslims who fled persecution in Russia. Another Somali Bantu family used to live in the Manchester Block, but they moved a few months ago to the Lawrenceville neighborhood just upriver. Most of the Somali Bantu families in Pittsburgh live in Lawrenceville, nicknamed "Somaliville" by some.

While it would be nice to be closer to friends and family, Chechaka-Asha has chosen to stay in the Manchester Block because, like the other residents here, he only has to pay \$450 in monthly rent to Catholic Charities. The row homes in Lawrenceville start at \$600 and the quality is often poor. Plus, he has a car so it's easy to visit people if he needs to.

After chatting with Chechaka-Sarah for awhile, Chechaka-Asha indicates that he's ready to buy batteries for that annoying beeping coming from his house. Chechaka-Sarah wants to come along for the errand, to check out more of his new neighborhood, and to ride in Chechaka-Asha's sleek blue Chevy Blazer. This is America, the land of cars. So the three of us set out in Chechaka-Asha's SUV for the nearest drugstore.

Only a year after immigrating to the U.S., Chechaka-Asha bought a minivan at an auction behind a local Wal-mart. It was \$1,000. He drove it around for a few months before he traded it in for his used SUV. Buying the cars has been easy. Getting permission to drive has been a whole other issue.

Yield: a white triangle bordered by a red stripe, a symbol that means stop for others and let them pass you by. In the tent room, Chechaka-Asha examines a yield sign in a Pennsylvania driver's manual as he attempts to learn the local rules of driving. It's December of 2005, six months since he immigrated to the United States. He's preparing for his permit test. As a newbie volunteer with Catholic Charities, I've stopped by the house and am looking at the driver's manual with him.

"Ok, so if you see this, you have to stop if someone's coming, but if you don't see anyone you can go," I say. I thrust my palm out like a stop sign, then shoot my finger through the air like a speeding car, and then motion with my other pointer finger to represent another vehicle. "It's kind of like a stop sign, but you only stop if another car is coming."

"Mmm, ya," he says in his quiet, mumbling voice that often rolls into under-the-breath chuckles. He leans back in his chair, fingers loosely spread over his kneecap. I'm not sure he understands, but he plays along well and I think he's getting the basic gist.

Asha and her siblings are bickering while Chechaka-Asha and I are bowed in green chairs in the corner. I'm surprised that he's not snapping at the kids because he was a strict disciplinarian the last time I visited—holding a spike of a coat hanger and shooting red-eye stares when anyone talked while I was reading *The Cat in the Hat*.

"Have you driven before?" I ask.

He nods yes. "I drive truck."

We continue looking through the manual. He doesn't really need help with understanding the rules of the road, he just needs to learn the vocabulary in English.

When he eventually takes his Pennsylvania permit test, a state employee administers it on a computer. He hasn't really used a computer before, and he's uncomfortable with navigating through the screens. Plus, he feels overwhelmed by all of the choices. Chechaka-Asha has had very little schooling, and the schooling he did have was mostly memorization, not tests in which you have to decide between so many options. Plus, it's all in English. When the time for the computer test is up, he's only half-completed the exam. He fails.

Chechaka-Asha tries several more times to pass the computer test. Each time, he fails. Finally, word gets through the Somali Bantu networks that it's easy to get a license in Arizona and there are translators there who can explain the test in Swahili, a language that he picked up in the refugee camps in Kenya. Chechaka-Asha saves up enough money for a plane ticket to Arizona, where he stays with a cousin. During the week that he's there, he takes the written test with a Swahili translator and passes the road test. Finally, he receives a driver's license from the State of Arizona.

Two years later in the SUV on the way to the drugstore, Chechaka-Asha plays some eastern African pop music.

"Can you help me use my debit card to get gas?" he asks me. "I try, but it won't work."

"Yeah, sure."

There's a gas station next to the CVS drugstore. When we pull up to the pump, Chechaka-Asha gets out and slides his debit card into the slot. Then he enters some numbers on the keypad. The machine asks him to try again.

“I put in my pin,” he says. “It doesn’t work.”

We clear the entry and Chechaka-Asha swipes the card again. I notice that the machine asks for his zip code, not his bank pin. When he punches his zip code in, the transaction works.

“Pfffh,” he says, then laughs at how funny it can be to adjust to the systems of another country. Even though he’s been here for a couple years, there are still many things to figure out. While he’s had successes (buying a car), there have been setbacks, too. Lately, it seems like Mame-Asha has had a psychological setback.

After Chechaka-Asha pumps his gas, we walk over to the CVS and find the battery section. We scan a whole wall of possibilities.

“We need the square ones,” I say, remembering the battery I could see in the exposed smoke alarm on the ceiling. Chechaka-Asha picks up the pack with the lowest price, which contains one battery.

“How many smoke alarms are in the house?” I ask.

“Mmm, four?” he says.

“Ok, so we need four batteries. I’d take these,” I say, pulling a two-pack off the rack. “Look, it’s buy one, get one free,” I say while pointing to a red sales tag.

“Get one free?” he says skeptically.

“Yeah, you get both of these packs but only pay for the price of one. It’s cheaper than paying for four single batteries.”

Again, he looks at me like I’m trying to pull a scam.

“See the tag? B-O-G-O means buy one, get one free.”

“Ok,” he says, blowing air out of his mouth, still not believing me. Chechaka-Sarah silently watches our exchange.

At the counter, the clerk rings up the batteries at the BOGO sales price. Chechaka-Asha is surprised.

“See, I wasn’t lying,” I say.

“Yeah,” he laughs.

Back at the house, the alarms are still blaring and Mame-Asha is still lying on the couch. In the backyard parking lot, Asha is squatting on a concrete parking curb with her new Burundi friend Sarah, Chechaka-Sarah’s eldest daughter. Their young siblings run around barefoot on the blacktop. The parking lot is fenced in and backs up to an alley, but no one ever parks here. For one, none of the Manchester Block residents have a key to the gate, so anyone with a car just parks on the street. The only people with keys to the gate are Catholic Charities maintenance men.

In one corner, there are two large dumpsters where everyone in the Manchester Block is supposed to throw their trash. Most of the garbage makes it in there, but often there are bits of foods and papers that get stuck to the pavement. Occasionally, someone tosses a diaper and it ends up in one of the shrubs that create a green strip between the row house fire escapes and the parking lot. The Catholic Charities maintenance men frequently remind anyone who’s home to do a better job of putting all trash in the dumpster. However, they inevitably receive a shrug and a claim that the other family did it.

Once, Catholic Charities staff coordinated a meeting to address cleanliness issues in the parking lot. All the Manchester Block residents were supposed to attend so that no

one could simply blame a non-present party. (“It was the Russians! It was the Somalis!”) However, the staff scheduled the meeting for a mid-afternoon when everyone was at work or in school or running errands. The only people at home were a Russian grandfather, a portly man with an enormous belly and a bushy mustache, and a Somali Bantu mother with her infant child.

In the parking lot, three office workers in suits explained loudly in Swahili and Russian and English—all at the same time—that diapers should not be thrown in the bushes; that people should not dry their clothes on the chainlink fences because it’s not appropriate (though the staffers did not explain why there aren’t any on-site washing machines or dryers); that if, in an emergency situation, they must dry their clothes on the fence and their clothes fall on the other side, they should go around and *pick them up* and not leave their bedsheets and underwear in the vacant, overgrown lots next door; also, if the residents continue to leave candy droppings and banana peels and whatnot in the parking lot, they will attract rats and roaches and all sorts of horrifying creatures that will burrow into the row houses and make everyone’s lives hell. Please, they said, tell all of this to your families. The Russian grandfather and Somali mother nodded their heads fervently at the whole speech and then retreated into their homes.

Tonight, with bedsheets flapping over the sides of the fences and plastic pieces from smashed children’s toys strewn about, it looks as though the message wasn’t passed on. Sitting on the curb, chatting with her new friend, Asha is wearing a checkered dress, but no headscarf since she’s at home and still unmarried—meaning she can still get away with a few girlish things. Her hair is braided closely to her head. Thankfully she hasn’t yet pierced her own nose. Her friend Sarah is wearing jeans and a T-shirt and has left her

cropped hair au naturale. Later, Asha tells me she dresses that way because she's Christian. "Muslim people always have to wear dresses," she explains about her own clothing style.

Asha told Sarah some things about Pittsburgh—how she took the bus to school in the mornings, how her parents go to the grocery store to buy food. They compared what their refugee camps were like. They asked each other if they had husbands lined up and both said, no, not yet. Asha told her that she wants to finish school and that she should finish school, too.

Inside, Chechaka-Asha stands on a wooden dining chair to reach a smoke alarm near the kitchen and change the batteries. Then he passes through the tent room, past Mame-Asha on the couch, and pulls the dining chair upstairs to change the batteries in the alarms near the bedrooms.

Even after all the batteries are changed, the shrill beeping continues. He plays with the fuse box again. Still nothing. The alarms won't stop.



## Chapter 3

Sucre

Two days later, after the beeping smoke alarms have finally been silenced by a Catholic Charities maintenance guy, Asha presses her stomach against the stove in the kitchen and lifts a sack of rice over a family-sized pot. She tilts the frayed mouth of the sack downwards and, *woosh!*, the white grains pour into the water-filled pot. Water splashes onto the stovetop as the grains plop in. When she lifts the sack back up, more grains scatter across the counter and skid underneath an unused microwave. Then she dunks her hand into the pot and gently shuffles the rice with her thick fingers, unsettling the clumps of grain. She's wearing a roomy T-shirt and a long, black velour skirt. Her head is uncovered and her short hair is parted into five braids that poke out from her neck. The braids are loosely woven and her hair is parched and frizzy, not smooth and tight and glossy like the hair of women who use relaxers and special oils.

When she pulls her hand out of the water in the pot, she doesn't flick it or dry it with a towel. She lets the water roll over the faint patterns of old henna in her skin and drip onto the stove dial as she switches on the gas burner. She'll clean up the rice and water later, during her nightly cleaning with Zeynab. Normally, Mame-Asha supervises the cleaning, demanding this be scrubbed or that be swept. If the housework isn't done properly, she won't let Asha or Zeynab go to bed. Or she'll wake them before dawn to complete their chores. Tonight, the girls will still clean things up, but maybe not quite as well as if their mother was here. Mame-Asha is in the intensive care unit at a nearby hospital. The errant smoke alarms really were sounding a warning.

While Asha cooks, she wonders what is happening to her mother. She doesn't really know what's wrong. Her parents left for the hospital several hours ago, when another one of Mame-Asha's confused spell-like episodes seemed to erase everything in

her mind and set her eyes wobbling like she was possessed by a devil. So Asha continues cooking rice for her father, like she does every day, and watches over her siblings—yelling at her brothers when their roughhousing gets too violent, making sure Zeynab is properly feeding Ebra.

Asha has been the primary cook and house cleaner for more than a year, ever since her eldest sister got married and moved to Omaha. Even though she generally knows what to do, it's weird not having her mother, her supervisor, here to give directions and advice. She hopes her mother comes home soon. Mostly, she hopes she doesn't die. What would she do if her mother died?

In the kitchen, she rinses some stray glasses and bowls while keeping tabs on the sibling-activity in the living room. In front of the sink, there's a window-sized opening that overlooks the living room. The window is veiled by the white and purple curtains that wrap around the living room. Through the veil, Asha can see the outlines of her shirtless brothers who have quit wrestling for the moment and are sprawled across the carpet, flattened in the July heat. She can also see Zeynab who is dancing in front of Ebra. Zeynab has tucked her 5-month-old brother into a sitting position in the corner of a couch that's covered in embroidered sheets. A bottle half-filled with powdered baby milk is tipped by his feet. While Ebra stares plain-faced, Zeynab flings her arms sideways and spins, attempting to entertain him.

"Ebra, ha Ebra, ha Ebra," she repeats over and over again, creating a little song with his name. She dances and coos in the way that people only do with audiences of young children or pets. "Ebra, ha Ebra, ha Ebra."

At the hospital, Mame-Asha is hooked into a web of IVs, lying in a hospital gown. Nurses have taken her blood; doctors have taken the pulse of her heart. Chechaka-Asha and Sally are at her bedside. Chechaka-Asha had called Sally on his cell phone, saying only that he was at the hospital and he hoped she would come. The doctors had been talking about blood sugar and something called hyperglycemia and he wasn't sure what it all meant, except that it has caused his wife to become very, very ill, possibly worse than she had been during the starved days of the war.

After the phone call, Sally—the lawyer and middle-aged mom—hurried to the intensive care unit with its tubes and metal boxes and electronic beeps. And now, like Chechaka-Asha, she waits. She doesn't really know what to do either. She isn't a social worker who knows how to deal with a health crisis for a poverty-level foreign refugee, but a volunteer with a local church. Still, as an American who has survived the paperwork and confusion of hospitals before, she has a vague idea of what to expect. Plus, she's shared meals with Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha and their seven children. She knows their names. She knows that they eat from one bowl, that they enjoy watching cartoons, that Mame-Asha likes to embroider sheets and pillowcases. She knows Mame-Asha the person, not the patient.

So they wait, Chechaka-Asha in his jeans and Sally in her work slacks. Occasionally he straightens his abdomen and tilts his head backwards, stretching his neck. Sally paces and shifts her weight. She has short, modestly-dyed blond hair and the athletic pose of a woman who still bikes in her 50s and will probably continue to bike until she's 90. In the bed, Mame-Asha is conked out. Finally, a doctor enters the aseptic hospital chamber and announces his diagnosis: Diabetes.

That night, Chechaka-Asha makes the appropriate calls to his family, while Sally contacts the Americans who know Mame-Asha. When she calls my cell, I happen to be visiting Mame-Asha's old neighbor and friend, Mame-Yusuf, another Somali Bantu woman. Several months ago, Mame-Yusuf and her nine children moved five miles upriver from the Catholic Charities' row houses in Manchester to a home in the Lawrenceville neighborhood, where the majority of the Pittsburgh Somali Bantu community lives—including Mame-Yusuf's husband's second wife and their seven children.

When Mame-Asha and Mame-Yusuf were next-door neighbors, they used to visit each other every day (except during occasional feuds) to talk about how food stamps worked, or who was marrying who, or what their children were telling them about school. Since then, they've only kept in touch sporadically by phone and through the gossip lines. This evening, Mame-Yusuf is embroidering a bedsheet in her living room that, like the rooms in Mame-Asha's house, is decorated in swaths of fabric. Instead of the muted white-and-purple drapes at Mame-Asha's home, Mame-Yusuf has hung hot pink sheets on the walls. She's also added some sparkle to the ceiling with criss-crossed garland and cellophane mobiles, the kind that hang in Mexican restaurants. On the floor covered in straw mats, Mame-Yusuf's six daughters are coloring, drawing pictures of flowers or girls with long hair (they have shaved heads).

On the phone, Sally tells me of Mame-Asha's diabetes condition. Both of us, knowing the daily maintenance of insulin shots and blood tests that come with having the disease, are glad that Mame-Asha's health issue has been diagnosed, but are worried

about her future. For her and her family, life in the United States has been a struggle of organizing—of organizing paperwork (utility bills, school permission slips, vaccination records) and of organizing other stuff they'd never needed before (mittens, socks, drinking glasses, stuffed animals, videotapes, pillows). Giving herself shots and changing her diet from a traditional rice-based diet to an expensive diabetes-friendly vegetable diet will make life even more difficult for Mame-Asha.

Cupping my cell phone to my ear, I watch Mame-Yusuf pulling a needle and yarn through a white cloth while Sally and I brainstorm ways to help Mame-Asha and her family. I suggest that Mame-Yusuf might be able to help care for the kids while Mame-Asha is in the hospital. When they were neighbors, Mame-Yusuf often babysat Mame-Asha's children when Mame-Asha was working at a laundry. Sally thinks it's a great idea. And why not? The 25 families in Pittsburgh's Somali Bantu community often band together to help their people in crisis.

After hanging up, I announced the news about Mame-Asha's hospitalization and suggest that the family might need some help with childcare. She fully agrees, and despite my insistence that the hospital doesn't encourage late-night visitors to the ICU and that she should visit tomorrow instead, she asks her eldest son to drive her to the hospital.

Several days later, all of the kids are still under the care of 14-year-old Asha. In some ways, it's fortunate that she was kicked out of summer school, so she can manage things at home. Chechaka-Asha declined assistance from Mame-Yusuf because, as he told Sally, he didn't want his children associating with Mame-Yusuf's teenage son

Dadeeri, a sly kid with a propensity for getting into fights and stealing. Dadeeri is a tough kid and, out of all the Somali Bantu children I've met, the one who's most likely to follow a bad path. Apparently, Chechaka-Asha has serious worries about his behavior, too.

This evening I've brought Asha and the kids cheese pizza, their favorite American food, to cheer them up. (Once, I brought a pepperoni pizza, which was a mistake because, as Muslims, they don't eat pork.) We sit in the corner of the drape room. Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha are at the hospital. While Asha and Zeynab and their younger brothers chomp on their pizzas, I attempt to explain why their mother is sick. The boys are squatting on the floor around the pizza box and on the stairs that lead to their bedrooms. Asha and Zeynab are on the love seat. Four-month-old Eha is swaddled and lying next to Zeynab's lap.

"Do you know what diabetes is?" I ask.

"NOoooo—NOOooo," Ali says dramatically while thrusting his chest out like a chicken. He's 9-years-old and the family goofball. With wide teeth, he looks and smiles the most like Mame-Asha, and often snickers with a similar erratic laugh.

"That's what we call the illness that your mother has," I say. "When people have diabetes, they have trouble digesting sugar."

"Sugar, sugar, sugar!" Ali exclaims, tilting backwards and yelling his words at the ceiling.

"A-l-i, shut up," Zeynab commands, drawing out the syllables of her most annoying brother's name, while she slouches into the couch cushions. She's styled her hair with braids that flip off her forehead like little antennas.

“Missus Cara, look!” little Husseini exclaims as he pulls a string of cheese off his pizza. At age 3, he’s constantly asking adults to watch his exploits. He’s only wearing a pair of sweatpants and his baby-belly is covered in grease spots from his fingers.

“Be quiet, Miss Cara is trying to talk,” Asha booms to everyone in her bold voice.

“Thank you, Asha,” I say. “Do you know what *digest* means?”

“Like eating!” Zeynab answers, raising her slice of pizza above her head and grinning with a tomato-sauce stained smile. Asha shakes her head “no” while Ali suddenly poses like a model lying on a bed and takes another bite of his slice. On the stairs, 5-year-old Hamadi chews a piece of crust that is so big he has to keep his mouth half-open as he chews.

“Miss Cara, can we go to the park ... PLEASE?” Ali asks.

“Maybe later ... if you’re quiet,” I say. “First I have to tell you about diabetes.”

“Ok, *ok-ay*, I’ll be quiet,” he says while rolling his eyes.

“So, digest means to absorb the nutrients that are in food, like in pizza. You eat pizza and your body sucks up all the good parts of the cheese and sauce and bread. But sometimes people have trouble keeping the nutrients in their bodies. So, with diabetes your mother has trouble keeping sugar in her body.” The kids all munch quietly.

“If she pees, it might smell like sugar. That’s because—”

“Ah, hahaha, her pee smell like sugar?” Asha cackles, breaking from her mother-role into girlish goofiness. All of her siblings join in for a giggle fest. Asha’s smile is wide and genuine, showing off her naturally perfect teeth. They’re healthy and white and straight, features that are only achieved through years of braces and regular dental visits for many Americans. Unlike other people from economically poor regions, who often



have stained or missing teeth and recessed gums, the Somali Bantus as a whole seem to have fantastic teeth. (The Russian refugees next door have not been so lucky with their dental attributes.)

“Her pee smell like sugar,” Asha says again as she continues to giggle and brushes her hand against the corner of her eye, which has moistened because she’s laughing so hard. It seems like she needed a good joke.

“Well, maybe,” I say. “Sometimes that happens to people with diabetes because they can’t keep sugar in their bodies. So it comes out in pee.”

“Sugar pee!” Ali yells. “You’re funny, Missus Cara, you’re funny.”

“No, I’m not just being funny. It’s true,” I say. When their childish excitement over bodily fluids calms and they return to munching their pizzas, I continue.

“So this means your mother will have to change what she eats. And she might have to give herself shots everyday.”

“Shots!” Zeynab yells. “I hate shots. When I get a shot, I cry.”

“Yeah, she cry like a baby!” Ali teases, pointing at her.

“So do *YOU*,” she retorts. I’m glad the piercing salon didn’t allow her to get her nose pierced last week. Otherwise, she would’ve likely shrieked in protest at her mother’s insistence that it wouldn’t hurt.

“So do you have any questions about diabetes?” I ask. Asha looks out the draped window and takes another bite out of her pizza.

“No,” she says matter-of-factly, returning to her serious self.

“Can we go to the park?” Ali asks again. There’s a small park with a playground that’s just two blocks away, but Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha only let the kids go if

an American adult is supervising them (usually me or Sally). With Mame-Asha's hospitalization, the kids have spent the recent hot summer days in the house or on the burning blacktop in the backyard parking lot. They certainly have a lot of energy to burn and it might help them to relieve some stress over their mother's illness.

"Yes, let's go to the park," I say.

"Yippee!" Ali yells, enunciating the word so precisely that it sounds like he learned it from a children's book, which he probably did. "I'm going to tell Smiley," he adds as he runs out of the drape room and toward a metal fire escape that leads to the backyard parking lot. Smiley is a nickname for a Russian refugee who lives in one of the neighboring rowhouses. His real name is Ishmael, but the pronunciation went through a series of adaptations between American and Somali accents. "Smiley" stuck.

"*Y-e-a-h*, let's go to the park," Asha says, with her characteristic, teenage drawn-out "yeah."

In haste, the pizza boxes are shoved near the garbage can and Hamadi and Hussein run off to find their shoes. Asha finds her headscarf since she'll be going in public. As an unmarried woman, she can expose her hair at home, but she usually covers it when she goes outside. She also grabs a scarf to strap Ebra to her back. I write a note to Chechaka-Asha, who's at the hospital with Mame-Asha, to let him know where we are and to remind him of my cell phone number. I leave it on the stairs inside the door.

Outside, Smiley and four of his younger siblings, as well as a gaggle of the Burundi kids, have gathered on the brick-hatched sidewalk for this outing to the park. Chechaka-Sarah, Chechaka-Asha's friend and the father of the Burundi kids, is sitting on

his concrete stoop. I try to explain where we're going, although it appears that the kids have already translated the message.

"If Chechaka-Asha comes home, tell him we went to the park," I say. "We'll probably be there for 45 minutes or so. Tell Chechaka-Asha," I repeat, hoping he's understanding my English even though he's nodding.

Finally, the kid parade begins and 14 children who grew up in refugee camps that neighbored Somalia or Burundi or Russia are hustling up the sidewalk. Ali and Smiley are in the lead, running and kicking a soccer ball in between them. Asha brings up the rear, maintaining her usual unhurried pace. We walk down an alley-road that leads to the rear driveways of homes, passing abandoned lots with rusty trash and old tires poking between the grasses. The neighborhood is set on a plain of the Ohio River and is bisected by a giant highway, I-65. It's a so-so section of the city—poor, sometimes violent, but usually peaceful. In the late 19th-century, it was a middle class residential area for businessmen, but then shifted to a working class neighborhood as river industries encroached on the area. These days, Manchester is a predominantly African American residential area with an average income of \$15,000 to \$24,000. The refugees living in the Catholic Charities housing are usually toward the low-end of the range, sometimes below.

As the kid parade advances, a small mutt begins barking from a yard bordered by a chain-link fence. Zeynab shrieks and sprints a few steps, pulling her friend Bahash, a raven-haired Russian girl by the wrist.

"Zeynab, relax!" I shout. "If you ignore the dog, it'll ignore you. Screaming won't help." Her shriek was partially playful, but partially fearful, too. She's afraid of dogs

because they're considered dirty animals in Muslim culture, hardly pets like the fluffy mutt with its collar. Also, dogs used to run in wild packs near the refugee camps in Kenya and people avoided them or threw sticks and rocks when they got close. Sometimes dogs mauled children and sometimes the dogs ate precious food. People in the Kenyan camps never petted dogs or let them snuggle in their homes as Americans do.

When we reach the park built on a triangle lot between railroad tracks and an expressway ramp, Ali and Smiley tear across the grass in a race. The other kids run toward the swings. Still a half-block away, Asha slowly turns the corner and continues moving toward the park, shuffling in her colorful scarves.

On a plastic jungle gym in the park, several neighborhood teenagers are lounging on the slides or platforms. They smoke while one girl croons an r&b song. They watch Asha as she slowly passes by and heads for the swings.

"Damn, that would suck to wear a scarf on your head your whole life," one of the teens snarks. Asha keeps walking, as though she didn't hear the comment, which she may not have. I worry that the group will harass her, especially since relations between Asha and the neighboring kids haven't been good on the buses and at school. Every few months, she seems to get involved in another scuffle.

"The Black kids at the bus stop, they say I smell bad and hold my face and spray some stuff in my mouth," she recounted once.

"The Black kids, they tell me to go back to Africa," she said another time. And usually, her reaction is to lash out and push or slap or kick. This time, the teens on the jungle gym go back to their smoking and singing, and Asha keeps walking.

I offer to hold Ebra, and Asha unwraps him from her back and then gladly jumps on one of the swings. Zeynab and her Russian friend Bahash are already swinging. The Russian boys have stripped off their shirts and are tearing across the playground like bare-chested Heeman wrestlers. They climb up the chainlinks of a fence around a tennis court and up the poles of the swingset and onto the top of a garbage can, always jumping off with abandon and somehow landing safely every time. The Burundi kids and the Somali boys occasionally attempt to climb after them, but never reach the heights that would seem to guarantee a broken arm. Mostly, they push the soccer ball around.

Ebra is tucked between my right hip and shoulder. Suddenly, I feel something warm on my waist and I thrust Ebra away from me, holding him by his armpits so that his torso dangles in the air. His piss just oozed through his diaper. It's not the first time that one of the kids has expulsed some sort of bodily fluid on me. This is why I wear an old T-shirt and jeans when I visit.

After a half hour, I start shouting that it's time to leave. After 10 minutes of begging for more time, the kid parade finally trickles home. When we round the corner of row houses, Chechaka-Asha is sitting on the stoop and he looks visibly relieved. The boys run up around his legs.

"Hey, we just got back from the park. Did you get my note?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"Oh, I left it inside on the stairs."

"No keys," he says. "I don't have my keys."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to lock you out and make you worry. I told Chechaka-Sarah to tell you where we went, too."

Asha, who's finally strolled up to the door, pulls a beaded necklace out from the neckline of her dress. It has the house-key on the end of it. She opens the door.

"How's Mame-Asha?" I ask.

"Ok," Chechaka-Asha says. "Ok." He doesn't elaborate.

"Good, good," I say. "Tonight I tried to tell the kids what diabetes is. And I'd like to go visit Mame-Asha. Do you think it's OK if I visit her now?"

"Yeah." He shrugs.

At the hospital, a guard at the desk asks me to fill out a visitor pass.

"Could you find a patient's room number?" I ask. "Her name is Mame-Asha ... Bago ..." I say, trying to recall her last name.

In Muslim tradition, people don't have family names like Western Christians, so Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha and the kids all have different middle and last names. In their culture, people are given first names, and then take the first names of their father, grandfather, and great-grandfather as their "middle" and "last" names. It's a patrilineal line of father's, father's, father's. Married women always keep their names.

So, Chechaka-Asha's full name is Salaam Mganga Mgaza Mohammed. Asha's full name is Asha Salaam Mganga Mgaza. Zeynab's full name is Zeynab Salaam Mganga Mgaza. And so on with the rest of the siblings. Since people in the United States generally have three names, the paperwork on their U.S. I-94 refugee forms and social security cards and school papers only shows three names. And many Americans keep their middle name a secret, or simply to an initial. So at school, Asha is simply Asha Mganga.

My name would be Cara Joseph Howard Joseph in the Muslim naming system. (My father is Joseph, his father was Howard, and his father was Joseph. My everyday name would be Cara Howard.)

When I enter the hospital room, Mame-Asha is watching TV. It's quiet. Her window overlooks the North Side of Pittsburgh where Victorian rooftops are reflecting the setting sun. She's sitting up in her bed and looks better than I've seen her in weeks. Her skin is noticeably glistening and I realize how off-color and ashen she had been before. She's wearing a hospital gown and plastic wristbands, but her hair is concealed under a black scarf with a silver spiderweb pattern. On the windowsill, there's a small white vase with plastic flowers that was given by some Somali friends.

We greet by squeezing each other's hands.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Good, good," she says.

"Yeah, you look great. Much better." Turns out her symptoms of fatigue and wobbly eyes were a result of hyperglycemia, a condition of high blood sugar levels that results from unmonitored diabetes. While Mame-Asha was pregnant with Ebra last year, she had some high blood pressure complications that may have been gestational diabetes, which have now evolved into full-fledged Type 2 diabetes, the type of the disease that generally onsets in middle age and in connection with obesity. Mame-Asha is a thickset woman who could be considered slightly obese. And though age 37 isn't quite middle age by American standards, it is by Somali standards. In Somalia, the life expectancy for women is 51 years old.

Mame-Asha's genes are likely playing a role in her diabetes, too. People of African descent seem to have a genetic disposition that increases their chances of developing the illness. Black Americans have twice the chance of getting diabetes as Whites. And a 1996 Ohio State study of African immigrants and African Americans showed that they produced twice as much insulin—a hormone that helps people digest sugar—as White people. This trait could throw the delicate sugar and insulin balance out of whack. In addition, the new American lifestyle could be affecting Mame-Asha's susceptibility to the illness. In a book called, *Prediabetes*, Dr. Gretchen Becker addresses the trend of Somali immigrants and diabetes:

“Low birth weights have also been associated with higher rates of type 2 diabetes, so a child born during famine in India who later moved to a city and got a good job and ate plentiful Western food would be even more likely to get type 2 diabetes. A possible illustration of this is a diabetes trend among Somali immigrants in Minnesota. Some of them are becoming diabetic within six months of adopting an American lifestyle—where type 2 diabetes was practically unknown—they walked or rode bicycles to get from here to there, and food was not abundant or highly processed. In recent years, malnutrition has been one of the major medical problems in war-torn Somalia. Now the immigrants have both the labor-saving devices of modern American lifestyles and plenty to eat, perhaps for the first time in their lives.”

In the hospital room, Mame-Asha and I communicate as best we can.

“I was just at your house, *nyumba*,” I say, using the Kizigua word. “I brought pizza for Asha and Zeynab and Ali and Hamadi and Hussein and Ebra.”



“Good, good,” she says, then repeats her children’s names outloud. We have very few words to communicate with and names take on a special significance. We both know these people. We both know these words.

“Pizza?” she asks.

“Yeah, we ate pizza.”

“Me, pizza? No pizza for me?” she asks.

“Oh, sorry, no. I don’t think with your diabetes—”

“Ah, hahaha. Ok, Miss Cara, Ok,” she laughs and I realize that she’s just joking. I smile. Her sarcastic comment was funny, but often I don’t understand her humor. Once, when Ali made a sassy comment to me, she yelled at him and told Asha to brace him. Then she gave Hussein, the baby of the family at the time, a broomstick and told him to whack his brother. While Ali cried himself into a fit so hard that sound stopped coming out of his mouth, Asha laughed and laughed, looking at me like I should laugh along with her.

Another time, she told me she had a funny story for me. This is a general translation, via Asha, of what she said:

“When I was pregnant with Hamadi, I got in line at the refugee camp to get food. I asked a Swahili man to help me.

“I’m not your husband,” he said, then hit me. Though it hurt, I stayed in line because we didn’t have enough to eat. They were giving out big bags of food, but they were so big that I could carry not them with Hamadi inside.

Then, the man and I shoved each other.

Eventually, I paid someone two bowls of the rice for someone to carry it back home.”

To me, this sounded horrific and I wasn’t sure where I was supposed to find humor in it. Mame-Asha thought the fighting part was hilarious. Wasn’t it crazy that she was pregnant and trying to beat a man? I suppose humor is how she has dealt with some of her unpleasant memories. But maybe she was proud of this story because it showed how she was asserting herself as the provider of her family, as a woman strong enough to fight back even when she was with child.

When Mame-Asha finishes laughing about me not bringing pizza to her, she asks about Ebra.

“Ebra? Ebra?” she repeats.

“Ebra, good,” I say, rocking my arms like I’m holding him. I don’t mention that he peed on my shirt.

“Go home,” she says. “Me go home. Ebra.”

“Yeah, I’m sure the doctors will let you go home soon. You’ll get to see Ebra soon.”

“Africa!” Mame-Asha shouts suddenly, looking at the hospital TV mounted on the ceiling in front of her bed. Images of women in florescent robes flash across the screen. Then a dowdy White man appears, sitting in a chair reminiscent of Masterpiece Theater. In a serious tone, he explains that African Muslims are living dark and confused lives and that they must be saved by Jesus. He continues to narrate as videos of women dancing are shown. They’re dancing in a small courtyard between thatched homes. Then there’s an image of men in rows, praying to Allah.

“Africa, good!” Mame-Asha exclaims, enjoying the familiar images. I’m certain she doesn’t realize that this is a Christian documentary critiquing her way of life. For once I’m glad that English isn’t one of the three languages that she speaks fluently. The haughty man on the screen is completely ignorant of his subject’s history and devoid of religious tolerance.

For centuries, men like this have gone into Africa to undertake the so-called White Man’s burden of bringing Christianity to the people and using it as a tool for oppression. It hasn’t only been Christians who have actively sought out converts, but Muslims, too.

Several centuries ago, Mame-Asha’s family wasn’t Muslim. In fact, her ancestors lived in southern Africa where they farmed lands in present-day Congo, Mozambique, and Tanzania. That’s the region where the Bantu tribes and the Bantu family of languages originates. Bantus are known for their traditionally African characteristics—round faces, wide noses, broad lips, robust hair, charcoal-black skin—the sort of physique that has been errantly criticized and devalued. Yet, physical characteristics are always invariable, and appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes the Bantu have characteristics similar to Arabians, for example, while some Arabians have characteristics that are similar to Bantus.

In the 19th century, the sultanate of the Middle Eastern nation of Oman established a slave outpost in Zanzibar, a coastal region of Tanzania that also includes an archipelago known as the Spice Islands. There had been trade and exchange occurring in those ports for centuries, and it now became a focal point of the Indian Ocean slave trade. The slave industry introduced a cash economy to Tanzania and Zanzibar, which

corrupted the economic relations between tribes and the systems that had been set up to support tribes in events of disaster. Consequently, by the time the slave lords began raiding inland, people in the northeastern coastal tribe of Zigua were starving because of a drought. (This is the tribe that Mame-Asha, Chechaka-Asha, Asha and the rest of the family are from. Today, they still speak the tribe's language—Kizigua.) The slave lords promised to take the Zigua to foreign lands for wage employment. Instead, they were shackled and squeezed onto a boat, which sailed northward to plantations in Somalia. By some estimates, 50,000 Bantus from multiple tribes across Tanzania and Mozambique were enslaved in Somalia in the 19th century.

Many of the slaves were purchased by Muslim Arabs or Cushitic people with Arabic blood who also had dark skin (but not as dark as the Bantus). From an American point of view, a view in which any trace of African blood can make a person Black, the situation could appear as a case of Black on Black slavery. However, the Cushitic and Bantu groups considered, and still do consider, themselves to be very different people. No matter the racial differences, however, slavery is still an exploitation of a person or group of people.

For some time, the slaves toiled in slavery, tending the sorghum, maize, and sesame seeds that were being exported around the Indian Ocean. Eventually they escaped. The escape story has been passed through the Somali Bantu generations via oral history. It goes something like this:

The Arabs shouted and pounded our backs. In the new land, Soomaaliya, they made us work the soil and then took the food we grew. We wanted to go home, even if there was little left. At least we could be Zigua there.

Our chief was imprisoned by the Arabs because they feared his power over us. Only his daughter, Wanakooka, was allowed to see him. She was a proud person with an internal fierceness. She began bringing messages to the people. In three moons, we will walk the continent, she said. We will go home. First, we must prepare. We must make weapons to protect ourselves from other tribes, from animals.

And so everyone began sneaking branches and stones to their huts to make bows and arrows. By day we dug in the fields and by night we crafted our weapons. The Zigua will return, we said. Wanakooka kept meeting with her father. He told her everything he'd heard about the peoples in the lands we would be crossing, about the stars we should follow. Then he told her that she was ready to be the new leader of the people. The next day, he died.

Three moons had passed, so Wanakooka knew it was time to escape. That night, we set a blaze and danced. The Arabs said we were primitive and stupid and we would be punished in the morning. But the next morning, we were all gone. They had no one to pound.

We migrated together, the Zigua. We did not have to use our weapons for protection, only to kill animals for meat. We followed the sun and stars. We followed Wanakooka. We walked over sand and hard soil and through swamps from which we drank. After many days, we came to a cool forest. Suddenly, the ground began jumping and shaking, throwing many Zigua—and trees—to the ground. We had never seen the land move and we were terrified.

Wanakooka prayed to her father for guidance, and she prophesied many deaths in the future if we continued our journey. The earthquake was a warning. Finally, she said,

let us stay here. This is a quiet valley with good soil and water. And so the Zigua did. For many seasons, we have stayed in the Jubba Valley of southern Soomaaliya. It is a good valley, a land of many foods.

After the Zigua's planned escape, other runaways in Somalia streamed into the valley, too. Displaced Bantus from many tribes, who spoke many languages, sought refuge there. The forest was thick and it provided protection. Plus, the dominant pastoral Somalis generally avoided the area because tsetse flies that lived in the forest and along the river could spread diseases to their livestock. For nearly two centuries, the farmers in the Jubba Valley (called "gosha" or "forest people" by other Somalis) were mainly left alone to farm the land, though they did encounter discrimination when they tried to sell their crops—people paid less for bananas grown by them than bananas grown by Cushitic Somalis—and in other areas of daily life.

The Jubba Valley is where Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha grew up. It's where mango trees grew along the Jubba River and where they farmed bananas and watermelons and yams. It's a place where most everyone is Muslim, a religious conversion that allowed the Zigua and other Bantus to submit to the new culture, but also allowed them to maintain some freedom. (Muslims are not supposed to own Muslim slaves.) The valley is the place where Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha would marry, bear children, and watch them die. It is a land to which they will never return. It is a land that Asha and her siblings have never seen.

## Chapter 4

### Camel Goods

In the pink tent chamber a week after Mame-Asha has returned home, Asha holds her mother's forearm and leans in close to see the faint blue veins in her skin. The two women are sitting on the couch. Nearby, the coffee table is scattered with various diabetes implements. Asha's face is tense in concentration, and as she gently sets her jaw, her chub-cheeks seem more rigid.

Little Hussein toddles near the coffee table and reaches out to grab one of the plastic pieces.

“*Whey!*” Mame-Asha shouts, pointing her free arm toward him and jostling her other arm in the process. Asha sits up and stares at her brother. Mame-Asha rattles a litany of words at her son and shouts to Zeynab to keep him and any of her other brothers away from the diabetes stuff, or else she will hit them with her flip-flop or a broomstick or her bare hand, whatever she wants, and why isn’t Zeynab paying attention anyway? She should quit playing such stupid games with Ebra and pay attention to what’s going on around her, what a foolish girl.

Zeynab leaves Ebra lying on the loveseat, grabs Hussein by the wrist and tugs him across the room. He promptly launches into a wail and Zeynab pulls his face into her skirt to muffle the sound. Mame-Asha shakes her head, frowning so hard that her forehead wrinkles and her square cheeks tense up. She mumbles in irritation. On the floor in the corner of the tent chamber, Ali, Hamadi, and I are reading a children’s book about Garfield the cartoon cat.

When Mame-Asha settles, Asha leans in to her mother’s forearm, then grabs a needle from the table. She asks her mother if she’s ready. Yes. Asha pricks a vein with a small needle that sucks up a few drops of blood, while Mame-Asha looks at the ceiling. She doesn’t flinch. Then Asha sits up and attaches the needle to a hand-held electronic device. After a few minutes, she reads the number.

“Seventy-two! That’s good, Mame!” she exclaims to her mother, commenting on a blood-sugar level that’s in the normal range. Then she stands up and plucks a marker from a drinking glass atop a faux fireplace mantle in the tent chamber. The mantle is cluttered with drinking glasses—pint glasses, juice glasses, fat glasses, skinny glasses, all of which have been donated by various refugee-assistant groups who assumed that a



family of eight would need an abundance of drinking glasses. However, the family prefers to use mugs for their juice and milk, and they rotate between the same four or five white mugs. The drinking glasses are instead used as decoration and to hold markers and scissors and wallet-size school pictures and plastic flowers from the wedding of Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha's eldest child, Halima, the year before. (She now lives in Omaha, Neb., with her husband.)

Asha uncaps the marker and writes "72" in a spiral notebook. The page has been divided into five columns with dates running down the side. Asha's large, sloppily written numbers mark Mame-Asha's sugar levels five times a day. Asha only began writing consistently two years ago when she enrolled in school in the United States and, like the penmanship of any beginner, it's quite large and jagged. Often, when she fills out forms for school, her handwriting is too large for the small fill-in-the-blank spaces.

Every morning, a Medicare nurse has been coming to the home to help Mame-Asha and Asha learn how to test blood sugar levels and give insulin shots. The trick with diabetes is keeping a balance between the amount of sugar in the blood, and the amount of insulin (hormone that controls sugar digestion) in the blood. Asha has served as the translator, as best she can, with all the new medical terms. And she's served an important role in tracking Mame-Asha's progress or digressions with the notebooks. Mame-Asha doesn't know how to write anything besides her own name.

I'm impressed that the notebook appears to have been kept in a safe place for at least a week. Often, objects like notebooks and calendars are torn by the young kids, or chucked in the dumpster because they're not viewed as having any importance to the adults. I once brought them a calendar so they could keep track of everyone's school

schedules and doctors appointments, etc., but since the parents can't read or write well, it was deemed useless and thrown in the trash. They usually just memorize appointments months in advance and rely on the kids and other parents to tell them when school is in session—or not. Another time, Mame-Asha asked me to bring her a notebook to help her learn to write and so I purchased the kind with big lines and letters you can trace. She used it for one evening and when I suggested she work on it again, she seemed to have forgotten that I had ever brought it in the first place. Maybe a positive benefit of her diabetes diagnosis is that it will help the family to become more organized.

If Mame-Asha was still living in Somalia, or Kenya, she might treat her diabetes with camel milk. The milk contains high levels of insulin or an insulin-like protein that can help a diabetic person to increase their insulin intake. The milk is also drinkable for lactose-intolerant people. Throughout much of the Asian and Middle Eastern world, camel milk is considered superior to cow milk.

In Kenya, thousands of people of Somali origin have been drinking camel milk to monitor diabetes. The milk has been in high demand. In 2005, researchers from Natural Resources International Limited conducted a study of ways to improve the raising of camel livestock, specifically to increase the amount of camel milk that's produced. They wrote this as their primary reason for conducting the study:

“It is estimated that Nairobi [capital of Kenya] has about 250 000 inhabitants originating from pastoral areas, in particular people of Somali origin. The often unbalanced carbohydrate rich diet coupled with a sedentary lifestyle has resulted in the regular occurrence of diabetes in urban Somalis. It is especially such affluent urban

Somalis with confirmed diabetes that value regular supply of camel milk to enrich their daily diet. When questioned, such diabetics confirm that their overall wellbeing deteriorates in the absence of regular daily camel milk consumption. - The fact that in Nairobi substandard unhygienic raw camel milk fetches almost twice the price of pasteurised quality cows milk further underlines these individual statements. Some Somali diabetics who recognise the value of camel milk are willing to spend up to a week at a time in camel camps away from town to receive camel milk therapy. Other non-pastoralist diabetics, such as the Kikuyu, have recently taken to drinking camel milk for its supposed therapeutic value.”

The camel is particularly revered in Somalia because most Somalis are pastoralists who have followed their herds throughout the country and the Horn of Africa. Camels provide transportation, milk, warmth, companionship, and—Mame-Asha says—excellent, excellent meat. She was shocked when I told her that Americans don’t eat camel and was even more surprised when I explained that camels don’t live here, except in zoos. Though there might be an obscure camel farm somewhere in the United States. After all, one Somali man who resettled in Norway founded a camel farm in Scandinavia in 2006. “Visitors could come here to ride the camels, buy souvenirs of camel hide and hair, eat camel meat and milk, which are very tasty,” he told a reporter for the United States High Commissioner for Refugees in Oslo.

Like the United States’ bald eagle, the camel could be considered a national symbol of Somalia.

Somalia is shaped like the number 7, a long and narrow country that edges both the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden that leads to the Red Sea. It's located in the Horn of Africa, a region that also includes Djibouti, Eritrea, and parts of Ethiopia. Collectively, the countries form a triangle that looks like the sharp, stubby horn of a toad or lizard. The triangular mass juts into the Indian Ocean and, Somalia—the country on the outer rim—is like the horn's glazed lacquer, the surface that glints in the sun.

The ancient Egyptians considered the Horn to be part of the Land of Punt, which roughly translates to "Land of the Gods." King Sahure, who reigned in Egypt more than 4,000 years ago, led ships to Punt to trade in myrrh, frankincense, animal skins, ebony, and other goods. His burial tomb and other Egyptian hieroglyphic texts depict scenes from travels to Punt—myrrh trees and beehive-shaped homes on stilts. Egyptologists aren't sure exactly which modern regions or cities were part of Punt, but the name is still in use today. Puntland is an autonomous region of Somalia in the corner of the country's 7 shape, bordering both the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

In the following centuries, people living in present-day Somalia continued to trade with Egyptians, as well as merchants from Persia and Arabia. This mixing of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian cultures created the Cushite ethnic group, a heritage that many modern-day citizens of northeastern Africa share. The term Cushite also refers to the linguistic family of languages spoken in Somalia and Ethiopia. Many of the people were pastoralists—nomads who raised livestock and traveled with the herds.

Somalia's beginnings as a state coincided with the founding of Islam in the seventh century. The Prophet Mohammed established the religion in 622 A.D. in Mecca, Arabia. His tribe, the Quraysh, was the family in power in the city.

As prophets do, Mohammed encouraged his followers to spread his religion. Soon afterwards, members of his Quraysh clan settled along the shores of the Gulf of Aden, the horizontal section of Somalia's 7 shape. There are varying stories about why his relatives moved there. It's not clear whether they were following Mohammed's request and spreading Allah's words, or if they were escaping persecution from anti-Muslim Arabs who targeted them because they were from the same family as Mohammed, or even because of harassment from other Muslims who did not agree on all the practices of their religion. For whatever reason, they left and then established the sultanate of Adel, which ruled the coast of Aden for the next 900 years.

Two members of the Quraysh clan were brothers named Samaale and Sab. It is said that all Cushitic Somalis can trace their ancestry to these two brothers. Four of the country's major clans—Darood, Dir, Hawiye, Isaaq—trace their heritage to Samaal. Generally, they are considered to be pastoralists, people who raise camels and other livestock. The other two major clans, Digil and Rahanweyn, descend from Sab. They are considered to be farmers.

Most historical accounts say that the name Somalia is derived from Samaale, the nation's common ancestor. Other etymological theories posit that the word comes from combining soo and maal, meaning "go and milk," referring to the herders. In addition, Somalia could be derived from "dhawamaal," the Arabic word for wealthy, that could also refer to wealth from livestock. Samaale's name wasn't immediately bestowed upon the region.

The horizontal region of Somalia's 7-shape, where Samaale and Sab settled, came to be known as Berbera. Maps used by Middle Eastern traders around 750 A.D. labeled

the land as such and the people were called Berberi. The northwest city of Berbera became a port that held an annual market for traders in the east.

On the vertical part of Somalia's 7-shape, Arabs began settling along the coast in the 10th century. Many of them put down roots in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital today.

By the 19th century, Arabs across Somalia were dealing with the Oman slave trade to purchase slaves like those of the Zigua tribe. That same century, the Suez Canal in Egypt opened. It was a shortcut that dramatically changed global trade and the political dynamics in the Horn of Africa.

One hundred and one miles long, the Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. Archaeologists have uncovered canals that connected the Nile River to the Red Sea as early as the 13th-century B.C.E., but the Suez is believed to be the first built from the Mediterranean. The modern canal was cut by La Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez, a private company whose shares were owned by the Egyptians and the French. It opened in 1869. Britain bought all of Egypt's shares within six years.

The canal gave European ships easy access to the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and all the nations that bordered the waterways. Britain, Italy, France, and other nations quickly colonized many of the lands.

In 1887, Britain claimed a protectorate over the horizontal part of Somalia's 7 shape and named it British Somaliland. British officials negotiated the western border with King Menelik of Ethiopia, the only country on the African continent that was never colonized. Two years later, Italy colonized the southern vertical part into Italian Somaliland, but not as far south as the Jubba River Valley. The British had already

claimed that as part of their territory of Kenya. By 1925, Italy claimed all territory east of the Jubba River. Then, during World War II, Britain and Italy invaded each other's Somalilands. British Somaliland was controlled by Italy and Italian Somaliland was controlled by Britain. The Gosha people in the Jubba Valley did their best to farm in peace.

Finally, after World War II, the European powers ceded their Somali territories back to the Somalis who built the nation. Italy ceded first, granting internal autonomy in 1956 and renaming the area Somalia. Then, in 1960, both the former British and Italian parts became the United Republic of Somalia. A man who had led the Somali Youth League that advocated for Somalia's independence, Aden Abdullah Osman Daar, was elected president. After losing the 1967 election, he peacefully handed over the presidency to Abdi Rashid Ali Shermarke. Two years later, Shermarke was assassinated in a coup.

The coup was led by Muhammad Siad Barre, who would rule the country for the next 22 years. Under his dictatorship, Somalia became a socialist state in 1970. He aimed to extinguish divisions between clans and unite people who had been invariably influenced under British or Italian rule. In 1972, he demanded that the oral language of the Somali people be set in written form following the Latin alphabet. Government officials were supposed to learn to read and write the Somali language within six months. Schools were required to begin teaching this new language. In the Jubba River Valley, there were few schools and hardly anyone went to school beyond one or two years of grammar school, so the new language wasn't effectively passed on to the Gosha people, who didn't speak the Somali language anyway.

The Gosha people and other minorities across Somalia were also excluded from Siad Barre's quest to unite the country. To foreign countries, he proclaimed that Somalia was the most homogenous country in postcolonial Africa—everyone was a descendent of Samaale! And he sought to unite all of the Cushitic Somalis throughout the Horn of Africa. He wanted to reclaim the Somalis who lived in northern Kenyan and eastern Ethiopia in the region of Ogaden. The Gosha people, well, they lived in Somalia, but they weren't really Somalis in the view of the state.

In 1977, Siad led an invasion of Ethiopia to reclaim the Ogaden region that belonged to the Somali people. To supply his army with soldiers, he recruited many of the ex-slaves, or *Oji*, who were living in the Jubba valley. In Somali, *Oji*, roughly means slave. Soon, Somalis had nicknamed the conflict the Oji War.

During the war, thousands of refugees from Ogaden began fleeing into Somalia. The country began receiving humanitarian aid to support the refugees. Meanwhile, the Ethiopians contracted with the Soviet Union to help them fight off Siad's army. Somalis began to oppose Siad's policies and attempted to seek a new president. In the 1980s, Siad used much of the humanitarian aid for refugees to fund his military. He also went against his original promises to root out tribalist politics and began appointing members of his own clan to government positions, while excluding members of other clans.

In 1988, he signed a peace accord with Ethiopia, but violence was beginning to build at home in opposition to his rule. In 1991, Siad was ousted and the entire government collapsed. He fled to Nigeria. No single leader came to power. Somalia dissolved into a civil war that became particularly violent in the Jubba valley where people had food. Nearly two decades later, the country still hasn't recovered.



In the tent-room, Mame-Asha and Asha have finished with the diabetes tests. Ali, Hamadi and I have finished reading the Garfield book. Mame-Asha looks at me, then points to Asha and speaks a few words in Kizigua.

“She say I am good. She say I can be a nurse,” Asha explains.

“Oh, wonderful!” I say, glad that Asha has a goal and that she has some confidence and support from her mother to pursue a profession outside of the home.

“*Y-e-a-h*, she say I can go to college and be a nurse,” she says with her easy-smile. “I’m going to go to college.”

A few months ago, Mame-Asha told Asha that she wouldn’t allow her to go to college because people die there. Thirty-three students had just died in the country’s worst school shooting at Virginia Tech University in April 2007. On the phone networks, Somali Bantu women across the country told each other that they shouldn’t let their children go to college because they might be gunned down.

Much of Somali Bantu public opinion could be measured by what is passed through the phone lines, which has become the primary mode of contact for many women. It’s not unusual for Mame-Asha to spend several hours a day on the phone. The phone networks are how hurtful rumors are spread (“don’t get birth control shots because they will make you sick”) and how important lessons are taught. Once, Asha told me that somebody from the 610 area code had daughters who left their space heater on when they went to sleep one night. The space heater caught on fire and the house burned. She couldn’t remember who it was—maybe a cousin—but she did remember the area code.

The tent-room is hot and the kids want to play outside. So we clamor down the metal fire escape to the backyard parking lot with a book about Mexico that Zeynab had borrowed from her school library. It's muggy and overcast. We sit on a concrete curb, the kind that demarcates parking spaces, and Asha and Zeynab and their brothers gather around. Some of the Burundi kids come, too. Rain mists on us, but it's a refreshing spray.

When it begins to rain a little harder, Zeynab suggests we sit under a sheet. She grabs a bedsheet that's hanging on a clothesline. We all shift to a corner where tree branches are arching over the chainlink fence and sit on the blacktop. We pull the sheet over all of us and read about Mexico and how people live there. It's hot and stinky and fun under the sheet. The kids giggle and laugh. We're a little bubble in a parking lot.

When we reach a part in the book that explains how women do basketweaving, Asha gets excited.

"My mom, she know how to do that. In Africa, she make bowls and, like, things that we sleep on," she says, holding her hand out flat and showing how the mats covered large spaces on the ground. She says they stopped doing it here because they don't have the right materials. Besides, the women have all started a new craft of embroidering sheets.

Every Somali mother in Pittsburgh has been embroidering bedsheets or pillowcases with thick yarn, the kind of yarn a teacher might use to create a face on a sock puppet. They cover their beds and couches and tables and doorways with them. Usually, they draw patterns with a pencil or pen and then fill in the flower petals or vines or hearts with brightly colored yarn.

Upriver in Lawrenceville, Mame-Asha's friend Mame-Yusuf is working on her embroidery in her own tent-room. While she pokes her needle through the cloth, draws a strand of yarn high above her head, and pokes her needle into the cloth again, she has a few words with her adult son, Yusuf. He's downloading music on a nearby computer.

"She is not moving here. She doesn't love you," she tells him. "Forget about that girl. You need to find a new wife."

"Ya, Mame. She will come. She will come to Pittsburgh," he says with a groan. A few months ago, he married a Somali Bantu girl in Columbus, Ohio. She seemed hesitant to leave her family there and she still hasn't come to Pittsburgh for a visit.

"No, she's not coming. You're 22 years old!"

"I'll figure it out."

"You need a new wife."

"Ya."

## Chapter 5

### Kakuma: It's Hard to Get Food<sup>\*</sup>

On a September evening two months later, Asha and I speed north on the I-79 on our way to Buffalo, N.Y., my hometown and one of the cities where Asha's aunts and cousins have resettled. The highway cuts through the leafy woods of rural Pennsylvania and over hills that obscure the horizon. Although the sky is pink and it appears that the sun has set, Asha waits patiently for the digital clock on the dashboard to flick to 7:46.

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<sup>\*</sup> One night in the pink tent-room, Asha suggested that this could be the title of my book about her people who lived in the Kakuma refugee camp.

It's Ramadan and she can't break her fast until the sun has officially set. Before we left her house, she checked a paper distributed by a Pittsburgh mosque that lists exactly when the sun sets each evening during the holy month of Ramadan. She has a half hour to wait.

Earlier this week, I offered Asha and Mame-Asha a ride to Buffalo since I would be visiting my parents for the weekend and it would be easy to drop them off and pick them up at their family's house. We had only recently figured out that I grew up in the same town where some of Mame-Asha's sisters and brothers were resettled in the U.S. refugee diaspora.

Mame-Asha declined to take the trip since she's still adjusting to her diabetes-management routine. Since her diagnosis, she hasn't left the house much except for visits to the doctor. As a result of her diabetes, she also put her plan for returning to the laundry job on hold. And she and Asha didn't even attend the August wedding that Asha wanted to get her nose pierced for. Focusing on health was more important.

Mame-Asha also decided to stay home because it's Ramadan and someone has to cook the special sambusas and hard candy and goat for the family's evening feasts. Even though she's not fasting for Ramadan—for the first time in a long time on account of her diabetes—she still wants to eat the holiday treats. She could eat them with her sisters in Buffalo, but then what would her family eat? Zeynab hasn't yet learned how to cook all of the holiday dishes by herself. So she will stay home to cook them. Zeynab begged to go to Buffalo in her place, but Mame-Asha decided that Ali—the eldest son—should go instead.

Mame-Asha was glad that her children could visit some family in Buffalo whom they hadn't seen in years, especially since it's a holiday month. When they celebrated

Ramadan in Somalia or Kenya, they often walked or carpooled to visit family and friends. Now they're living across the ocean, and the family they do have in the United States is spread all across the country, too far for walking.

In the car, Ali sleeps in the backseat. Asha and I talk about school and her friends.

"My friends, we meet together and we say we are not getting married until we finish school," she says.

"Oh, well that is a very good thing," I reply, pleased to hear about this bud of feminism amongst her friends. "School is very important."

"You know Yusuf?" she says, tapping a plastic grocery bag with her feet. It contains some snacks that she brought for the trip. In keeping with the rules of Ramadan, she hasn't eaten since before dawn.

"Yeah," I reply, acknowledging that I know Mame-Yusuf's second son.

"He want to marry me," she says. "But I say no. I am too young."

"Yes, I agree, you are too young," I say, surprised to learn that Yusuf proposed. It's not as though they were dating, a situation that makes engagements predictable in American culture. Plus, she's only a freshman in high school.

"Did he talk to you?" I ask.

"No, he talk to my father."

"What did your father say?"

"I don't know, but he asked me what I thought and I said 'no.'"

We drive on in silence. In some ways, the proposal isn't a random surprise. Yusuf is in search of a Pittsburgh wife. Plus, there was that fleeting moment two years ago when I thought Yusuf was interested in Asha's older sister, Halima.

It was a February night and I was dropping Yusuf and his family off at their Manchester house after we ate dinner together. Halima stepped out of the house next door and grabbed Yusuf's arm, smiling coyly. They slipped off down the sidewalk while the rest of Yusuf's family filed into the house. Yusuf's mother, who was clearly pregnant with her eleventh child but refused to even admit that a baby was on the way (it's bad luck to talk about an unborn baby), probably didn't even notice the exchange.

The following week when I stopped by the Manchester Block, Halima was cooking rice in the kitchen. She was stone-faced, not easing into her ready smile. Then Chechaka-Asha announced that Halima would be married to another man the following week. Halima refused to talk to me about the upcoming wedding. When I visited the other house, Yusuf was blasting music in his bedroom upstairs, not coming down to say hello, which was unusual. It's possible that he was avoiding being in the same room as Mame-Yusuf's newborn—there was indeed a baby on the way the week before. Still, it seemed both Halima and Yusuf were devastated by the news of her marriage.

Two years later, I wonder if Yusuf thinks that if he couldn't marry Halima, maybe he could marry her sister. In the car, Asha pulls a rectangular plastic container out of the grocery bag.

"It's time to eat," she says, even though it's 7:36 instead of 7:46. "I don't care about the clock. The sun has gone down," she says, pointing out the window. Then she cracks open the lid of the container and scoops a few salty brown beans into her fingers.

She chews them, slowly. When you haven't eaten all day, it's important to start small, she tells me. Otherwise, you'll make your stomach hurt.

Fasting has been an important spiritual act in the three interwoven religions of the Middle East since the beginning. Through fasting, believers are supposed to feel a closeness to God as well as a renewed sense of self-discipline. Biologically, it's believed that fasting clears toxins from the body. Intellectually, thinkers say fasting makes the mind work more efficiently; epiphanies and ideas are more likely to form when abstaining from food. Fasting is also supposed to remind people of what it's like for the starving poor.

Having fled 100 miles from Somalia without any food, Asha's parents know exactly what it's like to go hungry and she's heard the stories. There is, however, a distinction to make: fasting and starving are two completely different things. When fasting, a person knows that there is a splendid meal, a reward waiting in the near future. When starving, there might not be another meal again. On the escape trail, you might have to eat the bits of food left in monkey shit. Starvation is not based in the luxury of self-discipline, but in survival.

In the United States, Asha is blessed enough to refuse food because she *wants* to. She knows that fasting for Allah refreshes her body—she doesn't need a molecular explanation from scientists. Here in America, she feels particularly proud of her self-discipline, likely because it's a time when she's in control in her foreign environment. Unfortunately, she still has to go to school even though it's a holiday month, but the teachers at school have let her and other Muslim students go to the library instead of the cafeteria at lunch so they can pray and so they won't be tempted by food.



Asha doesn't usually pray at school because she feels uncomfortable, but in the mornings and evenings she prays with her father at home. Sometimes her siblings join, sometimes not. Chechaka-Asha isn't too strict about worship, though he is more devout during Ramadan. When they do pray, they stand on prayer mats Chechaka-Asha received from the local Pittsburgh mosque and face east toward Mecca. Asha stands a little bit behind her father, a difference acknowledging gender and age. They quietly chant Qur'anic recitations. Then they squat and bend for *salahs*. They lean forward until their foreheads touch the woven fibers of the rugs, then repeatedly rise and lower in prostration, worshipping in wavelike motion. During Ramadan, they celebrate the birth of Islam.

In a cave in Arabia, an angel appears unto a man. The angel, Jibril<sup>1</sup>, has come from the Almighty. This same angel appeared to a woman named Maryam seven centuries before and told her she would bear a child of God. Long before that, this angel also spoke to men named Aadam, Nuhaid, and Ibrahim. This time, the angel directs the man in the cave to spread new words, the words of one: Allah. The man, named Mohammed, returns to his home city—Mecca—to tell everyone what was revealed to him. This happened during the ninth month of the lunar calendar, known as Ramadan. So every year, Muslim worshippers celebrate this month as the month of their religion's beginnings.

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\* Spelled Gabriel in the Bible. Other people mentioned in the paragraph are known as Mary, Adam, Noah, and Abraham in Christian texts.

On the highway, when we pass a tractor-trailer, Asha glances up from her salty beans and notices that the truck is being driven by a woman.

“I like that,” she says. “I like when girls drive trucks. *Y-e-a-h*.”

“Yeah, maybe you can drive soon. When you’re 16 you can get a permit and learn to drive.”

“Yeah, I want to do that. I want to drive,” she says. “I will be 16 in December. December 13. Can you take me driving?”

“Yeah. You have to pass a test, though, first. You need to study for a permit test.”

“Ok, yeah, I will study.”

While we motor toward Buffalo, I sincerely hope that Chechaka-Asha will turn down the proposal. After all, Asha is still just a teenage girl and she clearly doesn’t want to get married yet. Her refusal doesn’t necessarily mean that the marriage won’t take place though. Her father could still arrange it if he wants to. There’s the possibility that they could be betrothed for a few years and then marry after she finishes high school.

Even if that worked, I wonder if the element of love will be considered. Do Yusuf and Asha have any sort of attraction to each other? Is love important for their marriage? Chechaka-Asha might consider it. It seems he married Mame-Asha for love, though there are different versions of their story. He only ever laughed and got quiet when I asked about his wedding. “It was maybe like 1986,” he said, running the math in his head with his eyes to the ceiling. That was all he would reveal. But Mame-Asha once told me a grand story, with a little help from Asha.

“At my mother’s wedding, they play the *shareero* drums,” Asha says. “My mother, she dance the *shareero* with my father.” Even though her brothers are crawling around the couch and coffee table and love seat where we’re sitting, she tells the story as though it’s a secret only us women were sharing. I have no idea what a *shareero* dance is, but her tone suggests that it’s a sexy, passionate dance like the Spanish tango.

She explains that women doing the *shareero* wrap a scarf around their waist, just over the cusp of their buttocks, and then shake their asses so wildly that they appear to be separate appendages. Unlike the more conservative *geera*, in which men and women dance in separate lines without touching each other, the *shareero* is danced closely between a man and woman.

“*Y-e-a-h*, they dance that,” she says with a shy-but-flirtatious smile and looks at her mother. Mame-Asha is relaxed on the couch, ready to tell me the story of how she met her husband. Asha had decided to add the prologue of the wedding dance, a story that had been told to her in the past. Then Mame-Asha begins speaking in Kizigua and Asha translates.

She was in Somalia at Moosgoy, working on the family farm. One day she helped her brother deliver bananas. He drove the banana truck and she and her friend rode along. Another man, a distant cousin who also worked on the family’s acres, was helping with another banana truck. Everyone finished their work fast in this team of two trucks. Then Mame-Asha’s brother left the truck to get some water.

The man in the other truck, Chechaka-Asha, got out and walked around the truck bed toward the women. Mame-Asha and her friend giggled, huddled together on the seat. Chechaka-Asha called out to Mame-Asha and said he wanted to talk to her, give her a

little money. She covered her face and didn't answer. In Africa, she said, women aren't supposed to talk to men unless they're married. If someone saw her talking to this boy, people would talk and say she was loose. Mame-Asha's friend was not quite as conservative. She told Chechaka-Asha she'd take the money.

"No, don't take it!" Mame-Asha cried. The girl obeyed. Then Mame-Asha's brother returned and everyone had to pretend like nothing happened.

Later that evening, maybe around six o'clock<sup>\*</sup>, Chechaka-Asha visited Mame-Asha's house. He brought gifts of bananas and soap. Her family observed the suitor and considered him. She was 13.

For awhile, they didn't see each other because they both stopped working on the banana trucks. Chechaka-Muya became the leader of taking water to the gardener. Mame-Asha traveled to nearby Garwen-eh to dig into the soil and grow food. Sometimes, they would see each other on the streets and he would stand there, wanting to talk. He would bring her clothes or soap or necklaces or perfume or bracelets. But usually, if Mame-Asha saw him coming, she would run away. Although she liked this man a little bit, she still could not show affection for him. She didn't want to be considered a loose woman.

Then, another man began bringing her gifts. He, too, gave her clothes and soap and necklaces and perfume. Mame-Asha ran away from him, too, but not in a catch-me-if-you-can sort of way. She ran, ran because she was afraid. This man's sister had married Mame-Asha's grandfather. And this sister had told Mame-Asha's grandfather that she

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<sup>\*</sup> Mame-Asha and her family rarely used clocks. They used the sun to tell time. Asha estimated the time for translation purposes.

didn't like him. Well, the family thought, if his sister doesn't like grandfather, then he cannot marry Mame-Asha. We do not want another one of them in the family.

When all agreed that Mame-Asha would wed Chechaka-Asha, the other man asked Mame-Asha to return all the gifts he'd given her. She said no. They were gifts! She could not return them. The man was upset, so Chechaka-Asha gave him some money to cover the price of the gifts and told him to leave them alone.

On the wedding day, a Dee-Hee came, a cart with food and soap and necklaces. People brought it and they sang songs. And Chechaka-Asha, he pointed to stuff that he liked and said, "I will buy it for her."

Then they took Mame-Asha to her father in Mogadishu, a man with four wives, the maximum number allowed by the Qur'an. He was dressed well. And Mame-Asha, she had applied a gold tooth, necklaces, and bracelets. Her father, he give her more jewelry, and two mattresses, and six chairs, and two tables. Her father, and one of her brothers, told Mame-Asha that because she stayed pious and didn't get pregnant, that was the reason why they bought her all this—one car full of stuff.

Then they took it all home to Moogambo. And Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha dance the *shareero*.

At the end of the party, everyone took them near a house. People picked Mame-Asha up three times and Chechaka-Asha hit her three times to show that she was his wife. Then the people sang "Sangootay" and they put them in the house together. They were happy to be together.

Then, after the wedding, they moved to Boorini.

In the tent chamber, when Asha completed this translation of Mame-Asha's love story, it turned out that the boys had been listening to the story even while wrestling with each other. Ali shouted out another ending to the story of his parents' marriage: "And when they come to America, they fight about money! Hahaha!"

Mame-Asha shook her head when Asha translated Ali's comments. It's true that life has been much harder than she expected in those early days. Later, when I asked a question about how Mame-Asha's family and Chechaka-Asha's family felt about them falling in love, Asha said in a matter-of-fact tone: "Because my father, he have to choose from three women. They give him three women and he have to choose."

However Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha came to be married, they seem to have an opposites-attract sort of relationship. Mame-Asha has spaces in her teeth and a wild, cackling sort of laugh with a raw sense of humor. Chechaka-Asha has gentler features, a quiet handsomeness, and a manner that's reserved and humble. He prefers the comfort of driving a truck. Mame-Asha loves digging into the earth or scrubbing her home with physical vigor.

In the car on the journey to Buffalo, Asha says she doesn't know what kind of husband she wants. Of course, she doesn't want to get married, now, to Yusuf. But she wonders what sort of husband she might find in the future.

"Because, I don't know. I think I want a cute boy," she says, then giggles.

"A cute boy, huh?"

"*Y-e-a-h*, someday I want a cute boy."

From the backseat, Ali asks if I can turn a light on.

“It’s too dark,” he says, his voice quavering a little. He sounds very much his age—seven years old.

“Ali, don’t be stupid,” Asha says.

“I can’t turn the light on because it will be hard for me to see the road,” I say.

“Don’t worry, it’s safe in here. Do you want an apple? Asha, why don’t you give him an apple,” I say, pointing to one of my bags.

It’s dark now and we’ve reached a halfway point between Pittsburgh and Buffalo—the lakeside town of Erie, Pa. I announce this fact to Asha. She recognizes the name because some of her father’s relatives live here. Erie is one of 50 cities/large towns that were selected to host the Somali Bantu refugees. When the U.S. State Department resettles refugees from anywhere in the world, they try to resettle them in large family groups to various towns across the country so that no city in the U.S. is burdened by a huge influx of immigrants.

A week after translating the love story, Asha translates the next phase in her parents’ lives. Predictably, Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha started a family immediately after the wedding.

By the time the fighting in Somalia began, they had two children—a toddler-aged daughter named Halima and an infant son named Hassani. Chechaka-Asha went into hiding separately from Mame-Asha because, she says, militias would immediately kill husbands if they found men with their families. Or they would be forced to become soldiers.

One day Mame-Asha was running from some gunmen. She had infant Hassani strapped to her back and was carrying Halima in her arms. Both children were sick and famished, her son even worse so. The men had taken a lady and they were undressing her. Then they shot off their gun. When she heard the explosion, Mame-Asha ran but her son fell off her back. He fell and cried. His neck was soft.

He stayed alive for three days, then died.

Through the whispers being passed through the forest, Chechaka-Asha heard that his son was dead. He returned discreetly to the tree where Mame-Asha kept the body and then buried his child.

One day, a cousin of Chechaka-Asha was walking through Mogambo. He was carrying seed for corn, going to his garden. When the militias saw him, they shot their guns. He fell with his seeds.

In the distance, Mame-Asha saw him fall. She didn't feel nauseas or sad that he was dead, like she might have felt before the war started. No, all she felt was hunger for the grains clumped around his fallen body. Mame-Asha hadn't found food for Halima or herself for days. Her own breastmilk was thinning, barely leaking into Halima's mouth.

And so, after the gunmen strutted off into the forest, she crept closer and closer to her cousin's body. His blood had oozed into the seeds, coloring them a deep purple. Mame-Asha brushed the bloody grains into her thin robes and snuck back into the woods. She found some water and rinsed the seeds, then cooked them on a fire, hoping that the militias wouldn't smell it.



When the seeds had cooked into a pale-pink mush, she pinched some in her fingers and pressed it into Halima's mouth. Then she scooped a clump into her own. It tasted faintly of iron.

Soon afterwards, Mame-Asha walked to her mother's house. When she arrived, people told her that her mother wasn't there. Her mother was walking to an old building with White people. You have to cross the Somali people to get there, they warned her.

When people approached her in the forest, she always feared the outcome. Every time, she held out her sick daughter and explained that she wasn't a fighter, that she just needed food. Sometimes the people helped, sometimes they said: "Move or I will kill you." And sometimes, people came and killed people in their sleep. Everyone was listening all the time.

Mame-Asha finally found the old building herself. She received a bag of mangos and papayas and bananas. But when she walked away from the line to find a place to sit and eat, the Somali people chose her to try to take away her bag. They grabbed the food. So she dropped it and ran away with Halima because she didn't want to be killed.

Halima was getting sicker and sicker. She was so skinny. And she was about to die. So Mame-Asha went to the tree monkeys. The monkeys were known for eating corn and then pooping some of it out. Mame-Asha savaged through the forest floor for monkey shit. When she found some, she washed it and pressed the corn scraps into Halima's mouth.

Then, in the forest, Mame-Asha's father-in-law gave her \$1,050 Somali shillings to get to the port city of Kismayo. With money, it was easier to pay the militias to leave

her alone, as well as to hitch truck rides. She got to Kismayo and went to working washing someone's clothes. In exchange, they gave her food to eat.

Finally, Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha reunited in Kismayo. He worked at a place where he carried bags of rice onto trucks. There were American White people at a building in this place, and even the Somali-people killers became a little bit nice. The American people gave rice. The rule was: one person, one spoon. When that was not enough, Mame-Asha had to scrounge in the forest at night to get food.

Then Chechaka-Asha got another job, driving logs from Kismayo to Liboi, Kenya. It was near Dagahaley, a refugee camp. He stayed there and arranged for a car to bring Mame-Asha and Halima. When she got there, she saw Chechaka-Asha. And his father, too. He brought rice and meat. They slept there and ate. She got a little water. And then the Swahili people and the White people gave food. They gave Mame-Asha and Halima little books, too. She didn't know what the books said because she couldn't read. But they were nice gifts, these little books. And she got tickets for flour, corn, and a tent.

The Dagahaley camp was one of three refugee camps that had been set up by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) on the outskirts of Dadaab, Kenya, about 60 miles from the Somali-Kenyan border. The arid town, a dry contrast to the arable farmland of the Jubba River Valley, was mainly populated by Kenyan citizens of Somali heritage. They spoke Swahili, a language Mame-Asha did not know.

The UNHCR Dadaab headquarters were set up in a walled, barb-wire compound, several miles from the three camps. The office was about 4 miles from the Ifo camp, 5.5

miles from the Hagadera camp, and 9 miles from the Dagahaley camp where Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha settled. For more than a decade, that UNHCR office governed the policies that shaped their daily lives.

Providing protection, repatriation, or resettlement services for people in exile is the mission of the UNHCR. Founded in 1950 by the United Nations to protect European refugees following World War II, the agency has helped millions around the world who have escaped strife in their homelands. Guidelines for the UNHCR were drafted at the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees held in Geneva, Switzerland, and attended by representatives from 26 nations in Europe, North America, South America, and the Middle East. The United States was included. Somalia, still a colony of Italy and Britain, wouldn't become an independent country until 1960.

Although the practice of granting asylum has been around for millennia, this was one of the first international legal agreements that defined who refugees are, and what rights refugees deserve. In the preamble, the representatives wrote that “the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person” with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country....” It clarified that refugees are considered innocent bystanders of the conflicts and wars that ensued in their home countries, and that a person who “committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity,” is not a refugee.

In the following pages of the protocol, which was composed in both English and French, the statutes dictated that countries should extend the same rights to refugees that

they extend to aliens. Refugees should be guaranteed freedom to practice religion, work, attend school, and access travel documents. Most importantly, the protocol declared that host countries could not forcibly return refugees to their home countries, even if the refugees entered the host country without authorization.

At the end of the convention, the protocol was adopted by the United Nations and finally ratified by participating countries in 1954. However, it was limited in scope as it only applied to refugees who were affected by “events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951.” Another convention was called in 1967 to expand the protocol to apply to all refugees in the world at any time. To date, 147 countries have signed the document, including Somalia, Kenya, and the United States.

In the Dadaab camp, Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha and Halima slowly put nutrients back into their bodies and begin to get healthy again. In the mornings, Mame-Asha stands in line to get rice, flour, sugar, salt. The White people also give out cans of white powder that turn into milk if you add water. If she could grow food to eat, she would, but the land is so desert-like that bananas or mangoes won’t take root. As more and more people flock to the camp, the lines get longer. In 1992, there are 134,258 people living in Dadaab.

Mame-Asha and Halima live in a small tent. Sometimes Chechaka-Asha is here, sometimes he’s gone for weeks to work. Then, Asha is born in 1992. Someone from the UNHCR fills out a paper and records her birth date. December 13.

Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha don’t know where they will go to provide a life for these two daughters. Some people at the camp say they can move back to the Jubba

Valley after the war. They're not so sure they want to return. Even before the war, they were discriminated against and think that this might be their chance to seek a better life.

Still, there's hope that the United Nations and Americans can restore peace in their country. Word has been passed that the militaries are in Somalia, protecting innocent people and stopping the killers.

The Americans already had some connections there. Four U.S. oil companies had settled agreements with Somalia during the last years of President Barre's rule.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, nearly two-thirds of the country had been allocated to Chevron, Amoco, Phillips, and Conoco for exploration of oil reserves. Geologists had flagged the country as a potentially fertile source of petroleum. The civil war was no doubt disturbing the companies' business.

In 1993, U.S. Army Rangers are sent into Mogadishu to capture a Somali warlord. What is supposed to be a simple and peaceful operation turns into a seventeen-hour battle. Civilian Somalis equipped with automatic weapons and grenades are among those who fight the rangers and shoot down Black Hawk helicopters. Hundreds of people die in the battle. The United States, embarrassed by the disaster, pulls troops from Somalia. The civil war continues.

Meanwhile, in Dadaab, Cushitic Somalis are applying for refugee resettlement to the United States. Many of them are accepted and move to Minnesota, a drastic change from their equatorial home. Other Somalis like the Gosha people are steered toward seeking resettlement in Africa. Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha write on papers for them to go to Mozambique or Tanzania. In Tanzania, they could still speak their Kizigua language.

Then, although Mame-Asha thought her family would be safe in the UNHCR camp, the Somalis come and take her food again. A Somali woman tells Mame-Asha that if she doesn't clean her tent, she will take her food. And the Somali people, they try to get Chechaka-Asha to go into the forest and steal things. Then, they give a job working with fans. For four months he works for free. They don't give him any money. Finally, Mame-Asha tells him to quit. They are using him as slave labor.

By the time Zeynab is born, Mozambique and Tanzania have both decided that they're too poor to properly accommodate thousands of refugees. Tanzania is already dealing with refugees from Rwanda and Burundi. And Somalia is still in turmoil, making a return impossible. So, the family waits. They fill out more papers. The UNHCR labels them and other Gosha people as Bantus, Somali Bantus. It's a general, catchall term to denote Somalia's ex-slaves, people of many cultures and tongues.

Then, in 1999, the United States agrees to resettle as many as 14,000 Somali Bantu refugees. It is a good year. Ali is born, too. Chechaka-Asha is happy. He finally has another son, another son in addition to the one he buried. The UNHCR begins making preparations to send the Somali Bantus to the United States. Then 9/11 happens and immigration to the U.S. is put on hold.

In Dadaab, Asha works for a Cushitic woman. She gets a little pay to clean and stand in the food line. Often, at Mame-Asha's urging, Asha inflates the prices of food she buys on the black market and she keeps the extra money.

Then the family goes to Kakuma. Kakuma is a refugee camp in northwestern Kenya. It was founded to protect refugees of the Sudanese civil war that's been an ongoing conflict since 1983. Khadra Mohammed, director of the Pittsburgh Refugee

Center, who has visited Kakuma describes it in this way on her center's Web site: "The camp has grown in size from a few tents and stretched to over 10 miles of shacks, mud huts, and cardboard houses. The camp is located in some of the harshest terrain in Kenya where temperatures exceed 100 degrees over the summer. It is in a remote area with no infrastructure. We met many refugees who had been living under these conditions for over a decade with no solution in sight for finding them a permanent home."

In Kakuma, Asha remembers living in a mud hut that they built. Every few days, they would pack colored powder into the walls to bring some brightness to the inside. Here, Hamadi and Hussein were born. She says they were "ugly" and "wet." Sometimes, when I ask her questions about the camps, she tells a vague story without much detail. "One day, a man stared at me and Halima through the window. We were so scared," she told me. When I asked her what he looked like and if he came inside and how old she was and where the window was, she had no comment. She had told her story and there wasn't much else to say. Her responses could be characteristic of Somali Bantu culture.

Resettlement officials who interviewed Somali Bantus in Dadaab and Kakuma for resettlement to the United States observed that the Somali Bantus often answered questions in a circular manner. In a report by the International Organization for Migration, staff explained that:

"Somali Bantus have no exposure to interviews and are unaccustomed to responding to questions in a manner that results in proper documentation. For example, when asked where they entered Kenya, many Somali Bantus responded, "at the tall metal," indicating metal phone towers in the border town of Liboi." They also said that

“many Somali Bantus do not place any importance on age or years.” This is an example of the interviews they experienced:

“A typical verification conversation regarding age would proceed as follows:  
Verifier: ‘How older are you?’ Woman: ‘I’m 30 years old.’ Verifier: ‘Are you 30 years old now, or were you 30 during the Mozambique registration in 1997?’ Woman: ‘They told me I was 30 then.’ Verifier: ‘How old are you now?’ Woman: ‘I don’t know. You can give me an age.’”

In Kakuma, when it seems that the first Somali Bantus are ready to depart for the United States, a corruption scandal unfolds in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital. UNHCR workers are accused of auctioning refugee slots, and American admissions officials decide to scrutinize the Bantus in further interviews.

Finally, the first Somali Bantus are sent to the United States in 2003. Every few days, officers in the Kakuma camp post lists with people’s names and the cities where they’ll be resettled. In the mornings, when the workers arrive, dozens of people crowd around the board to see who has been selected. Finally, in 2005, Chechaka-Asha sees his name. He and his family are going to Pittsburgh, a city he’s never heard of before.

During the last step of the immigration process, Chechaka-Asha is informed that he will have to repay a loan to the U.S. government for the cost of airfare to move to the United States. The following is an actual memo from the U.S. Department of State’s Cultural Orientation Resource Center, which lays out the procedure for officials who need to explain the airfare loan policy to refugees:



**Topic:** Pre-Departure Processing

**Activity:** Calculating Your IOM [International Organization for Migration] Loan Repayment

**Resettlement Reality**

Refugees are often not yet aware that they will be responsible for paying back the cost of their flight to the United States, or may be aware, but are worried that the cost will be too much for them to pay.

**Objectives**

Participants will be able to calculate an approximate monthly payment for repaying their IOM loan.

Armed with this information, participants will be less anxious about starting their new lives in the US ‘in debt.’

**Time**

5-10 minutes

**Materials**

- Sample IOM promissory note

**Procedure**

1. Ask the participants how much they have had to pay for their medical exams and CO [cultural orientation] class (answer: nothing!). Then ask how much they have to pay for their airfare to America (lots of joking here, “Free!”).
2. Tell them that the airfare is considered a loan, which they will be expected to pay back after they get to America.
3. Show a sample of the IOM promissory note, and explain that before each family goes to America, they will be expected to sign the note, as a legal contract, that they promise to repay the loan.
4. Calculate the loan amount based on the latest figures from Ops for adults and children. Calculate the cost total for a family, and for a single person.
5. Explain that they will be expected to start paying off their loan 4-6 months after arriving in America, and that they will be given approximately 36 months, 3 years, to pay off the loan. Divide the loan totals by 36 to get an approximate amount. Explain that the minimum payment is usually no less than about \$35, so a single may well pay off their loan before 3 years’ time.
6. Explain that paying the loan on time is important, and is one of the first steps they will take towards getting a good credit rating in America, which will be useful for getting loans in the future for houses, cars, education, etc.
7. Explain that their yellow copy of the promissory note contains contact information about their resettlement agency, such as address and telephone number;

this tells them what city and state they will be going to, if they do not already know, as well as gives them an telephone number to call for help when they need it.

Note how the memo places “in debt” in quotes, as if that’s not the truth. When Chechaka-Asha arrives in the U.S., one of the first pieces of mail he receives at the Manchester Block is a bill from the U.S. government for some \$5,000.

Finally, we arrived at Aunt Madina’s in Buffalo. Since we crossed the New York State border, Asha has been sleeping with her scarf over her face. Ali has slept and watched quietly out the window.

I park across the street from a square apartment building. Several of the windows are glowing with colored sheets, so I’m certain we’ve come to the right place. Asha and Ali walk up four flights to their aunt’s place. Asha carries her grocery bag with everything they need for the weekend. (This will not be a high-maintenance slumber party that requires a sleeping bag, toothbrush, pajamas, and fresh clothes for each day.) Inside, their aunt gives them hugs and kisses on the cheek. Then she leads them into her tent-room, a homey place to be after their journey.

## Chapter 6

### Homework

“In Africa, the teachers, they hit you,” Asha tells me one October evening in 2007 while she’s working on math homework in the tent-room.

“Yeah,” Zeynab adds, sitting up from her crouched position on the floor where she’s coloring a picture. “If you come to school dirty, they will hit you. And if you have hair, they will hit you.”

“Yeah, in Somalia, they say that if you have hair on your head when you are learning the Qur’an, then the words can’t get inside you,” Asha explains, referencing her

family's country of origin even though she's never actually been there. "The hair gets in the way. People who have hair are stupid."

"So we have to shave our hair," Zeynab says, drawing a crayon over her head like it's a razor. Her hair, like usual, is braided into funky little antennas that stick out from random spots on her head.

"So do you think your hair is getting in the way of your learning now?" I ask.

"No," Asha scoffs. Her hair, like usual, is braided flat and close to her head. At the hairline on her forehead, tiny wisps of new hairs wave gently like sea coral.

"In Africa, the teachers, they do this to your fingers," Asha says, weaving her fingers over and under her pencil. "Then, they slap them with a stick," she explains, slapping her exposed fingers with her other hand.

"It hurt," Zeynab assures.

At one time or another, nearly every Somali Bantu kid I've met who's old enough to remember school in the refugee camps tells me the same story about having their knuckles slapped. It's the narrative they remember, the story that contrasts the old life with the new. In most American schools, punishments are more likely to involve time outs or detention, not slaps from teachers.

"Yeah, in Africa they do this," Hamadi pipes up. He stands up from the dinosaur puzzle he's been playing with. With his hands, he tries to mimic what Asha did with her pencil.

"Shut up, you're a baby," Asha says. At six years old, he's too young to have attended school in the camps, but he seems eager to learn the stories of his family's past

and make them his own. He's not discouraged by his sister's comment and continues storytelling.

"In Africa, we put a kite," he says. "Yeah, with my friends. We run and it go high in the air." He points his finger toward the ceiling and looks upwards with such intensity that I look up to see if I can see his imaginary kite. I only see pink wall drapes.

"Is this right?" Asha asks, pointing to a problem of long division on a homework paper that she's spread on the coffee table. Her numbers are completely off and I wonder if she just wrote out some guesses.

"No, let's try again," I say. She's supposed to divide 736 by 4.

"You have to figure out how many times 4 goes into 7. How many times does 4 go into 7?" She looks blankly at her paper.

"What is 4 plus 4?" I ask. She begins counting on her fingers.

"Eight!" Zeynab shouts from her coloring.

"Eight," Asha says, taking her sister's answer.

"So 4 can go into 8 two times, right?" I say. "But it can't go into 7 two times because 7 is smaller than 8. So 4 goes into 7 one time." I think she might be lost, but I decide to keep going and see if she remembers what I assume she was taught in school.

"Ok, since 4 goes into 7 once, you have to put a 1 here," I say, pointing to the top of the division symbol.

"Now, what is 4 times 1?"

"One?"

"No."

"Four, Asha," Ali groans from the couch.

“A-l-i,” she says in a harsh tone.

“Any number times 1 is always the number,” I say. “Two times 1 is two. Three times 1 is 3. Eight times 1 is eight. Twenty times 1 is twenty. See what I mean?”

We painstakingly work through the problem like this and I wonder how she’s managing to get through ninth-grade math when she still sometimes struggles with addition and hasn’t memorized her times tables. Her goal to become a nurse seems to be a long way off, since the curriculum involves a lot of math and science. She has many other academic issues, too. Like with geography. Although we’ve looked at world maps together, she still hasn’t quite figured out the concepts of continents versus countries versus states. I was once telling her a story about my friend who served with the Peace Corps in Mali.

“That is not Africa,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s in Western Africa. My friend says it’s the country that looks like a bowtie,” I said, then dug into my toy bag for a map.

On most of my visits with Asha’s family, I bring a bag of children’s books, Jenga blocks, puzzles, crayons, and other kids-things to keep everyone occupied. When I first began visiting the families, I often gave them books (donated by my reading-teacher mother) and notepads and stuffed animals and other small toys. When I returned in coming weeks and asked if we could read one of the books I gave them, all of the books and other toys seemed to have mysteriously disappeared. At first the excuse was that they couldn’t find them, but then other reasons were admitted: “Husseini peed on the book and we had to throw it in the dumpster;” “my mother threw it away because I didn’t do my

chores;” “I took it to school.” So I started bringing a small bag of goodies that I leave in the trunk of my car and tote in and out whenever I visit.

When I found the world map, I asked Asha to point out Africa. She shrugged.

“Africa is where I’m from,” she said.

“Yes, I know, but Africa is a big continent with many countries. Look, all of this is Africa,” I said, tracing the map with my finger. “And here is Somalia and Kenya. They are part of Africa. But look, here is Mali. It’s part of Africa, too.”

“Oh,” she said.

Now, the long division problem is just as confusing. When we finish it, Asha says, “Next year, we are doing algebra.”

“Yeah, we are doing algebra next year in my school,” Ali says from the corner of the couch where he’s spent the evening purposely looking bored. He attends Snowdrop Elementary, a private science-oriented Muslim school in the Monroeville suburb of Pittsburgh, on a scholarship.

“No, you’re a baby,” Asha says.

“No, we’re doing it next year, Asha,” he insists. “My teacher said.”

“But I am doing it next year in tenth grade,” she says.

“Because you’re stooooopid,” Ali retorts.

“Shut up, Ali, you’re stupid,” she says.

“Well maybe you can help each other learn,” I say. “That would be better for both of you.” Even as I say this, I don’t have much hope that they’ll be good partners in math. The age difference and gender difference makes them too competitive.

Ali has been lucky to attend the same school for all three years that the family has been in Pittsburgh. Since he's at a private school with many international students and small classes, he's been advancing well. Plus, since he was able to start in first-grade at the appropriate age of six, he's had less to catch up on in terms of understanding how to take a test or how to ask a teacher a question.

Asha has been sent to a different school every year. School has been a huge challenge for her, other Somali Bantu students, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools. When Asha entered the seventh grade, she'd attended few classes in the Kenyan camps. Since Kizigua is an oral language, she'd never learned to read or write it, though she had to write some Arabic in Qur'an class. And she'd only learned enough basic math to figure out simple addition and subtraction. Her education level was really the same level as her brother, Ali. Why shouldn't she have started in first grade, then?

The large disparity in knowledge and age for many of the Somali Bantus was a conundrum for the Pittsburgh Public Schools, too. The schools ended up setting up Somali-only classrooms that segregated the students not only from the general school population, but from other international students enrolled in the English as a Second Language programs. When Asha started at the Frick International Academy for middle school students, she was sent to a Somali-only classroom. While the intent may have been to better assist students who had little education and needed to begin with first grade curriculum, it also segregated her and her Somali Bantu friends from the rest of the school. This institutional separation may have increased some of the fighting between American and Somali Bantu students in the hallways, cafeterias, restrooms, and on the buses.



Miscommunication problems were also leading to the harassment issues. For the first two years that Somali Bantus had been enrolled, the school district relied on Swahili translators to disseminate information to students and parents, most of whom speak some Swahili as a second language (but not fluently) and were not familiar with school-related vocabulary or public education. Most of the flyers that were sent home were in English. There was much confusion over expectations, school bus schedules, special education evaluations, and the like.

For Asha's brother Hamadi, miscommunication issues led to some embarrassing first days in Kindergarten. He hadn't yet learned the English word for "bathroom," so he didn't know how to follow his teacher's directions about where it was. He also didn't know how he should ask where to go. So he occasionally wet his pants during those first weeks of school. Other kids teased him and he lashed out with punches and kicks. His teacher came to the conclusion that he wasn't potty-trained, was not mature enough for Kindergarten, and that it would be better if he simply stayed home for the rest of the year and then tried school again in the fall. The teacher expressed her plans to Chechaka-Asha, who thought his son was plenty smart enough to be in school.

Finally, after a meeting with Chechaka-Asha, Sally, and other administrators, it was decided that Hamadi would stay in school but the situation would be monitored. Someone suggested that Hamadi be shown the bathroom since Chechaka-Asha said he didn't have any trouble with toilet-training at home. After the meeting, a teacher led Hamadi by the hand down the hallway to the boys' room. She explained that he needed to raise his hand and ask permission when he needed to go to the toilet. By now, he'd watched his classmates enough that he'd learned that you could raise your hand if you

wanted to talk to the teacher. After that, he never wet his pants again. However, some of the fighting continued since his first reputation in the classroom was that of the smelly, pee-kid.

Sally addressed the Somali Bantus' issues with the Pittsburgh school district in a May 2006 complaint she filed as an attorney with the Education Law Center. The lawsuit was on behalf of 50 some Somali Bantu students in the schools. The school came to an agreement, stating that they would in the future:

- 1) Hire a Somali speaking ombudsperson to advocate on behalf of the Somali Bantu students
- 2) Provide school and educational information in the language and mode the Somali Bantu parents and other English language learners would understand.
- 3) Expand professional development efforts with regard to issues specific to refugee students and other English language learners; and
- 4) Address issues of racial and ethnic harassment through staff training, monitoring and data collection.

To the school district's credit, the majority of schools and resettlement agencies across the country didn't realize that Somali Bantus don't speak Swahili or Somali, their country's national language, very well. And until a few Bantus learned English themselves, it would be very difficult to find professional translators of Kizigua or Maay-Maay, the main languages that Somali Bantus speak. Still, under federal laws like the Equal Educational Opportunity Act, schools are required to provide appropriate translation services.

Misperceptions about the Somali Bantu have also been circulating through American resettlement agencies and the media, too. Many stories romanticized the Bantus' "primitive" nature, suggesting that they were still living in the 18th-century and were now leaping two centuries ahead. A feature article in the March 10, 2003, edition of *The New York Times*, said this: "The Bantu, who were often denied access to education and jobs in Somalia, are mostly illiterate and almost completely untouched by modern life. They measure time by watching the sun rise and fall over their green fields and mud huts."

That's a lovely image of a Westerner's view of Africa, a stereotypical take that ignores the fact that many Bantus were not "primitive." Chechaka-Asha drove trucks and has told me about a giant dam on the Jubba River that generates power. Mame-Asha's father moved to the capital of Mogadishu and she visited him there in that urban city of "modern life." The family used to attend weekly movie nights in the Kakuma camp. No, they have not lived in urban cities, but they're also not "primitive."

A year before the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter wrote the "Reversal of Fortune" article about the female friends who reunited in Pittsburgh, she also wrote a piece announcing the arrival of the Somali Bantus. In it, she suggested this: "The first time most of them laid eyes on electric lights, gas stoves, flush toilets or television was at an orientation session in Kakuma. They've never touched snow, used a washing machine, shopped in a grocery store or handled a bank account."

While much of this could be true for many Somali Bantus, it gives readers the false impression that they weren't even aware of electricity or other trappings of "modern life." It's as insulting as suggesting that Amish Americans are still living in the 18th-

century and aren't aware of the society around them. Of course they're living in the 21st-century. Maybe they haven't used flush toilets, but they have, for example, been in close contact with complex modern weaponry that most people in the Western world have never seen.

The segregation issue with the Pittsburgh Public Schools also had a precedent in the way that Catholic Charities resettled the Somali Bantus. Rather than send the families to the Prospect Park campus with other refugees, they chose to place them in the Lawrenceville neighborhood. Following standard policy, Catholic Charities paid for the first three months of rent. After that, the clients had to pay by themselves. Yet the monthly rates with independent landlords were at least \$200 higher than at Prospect Park. By the time Chechaka-Asha's family resettled, the Manchester Block had opened and they were lucky to get a spot there. And other families were being resettled in the Troy Hill neighborhood. Mame-Yusuf's eldest son, Ali, with a wife and three kids of his own, was placed in a house with a gaping hole in the ceiling and rodent infestations.

In 2005 in the downtown office of the Catholic Charities' Refugee Services, I meet with the organization's volunteer coordinator to sign up for the volunteer program. She has the stern demeanor of a grammar teacher and her grey hair is short and puffed by a hair dryer, creating the effect of a ribbed seashell. Named Elizabeth, the woman says she'll assign me to a Somali Bantu family because they are in greater need compared to other refugees. Then she fills me in on a little bit of their background. The only thing I know about them is what I can vaguely recollect from the article about the two female friends: that they were a low-caste group in their country.

“The Bantu need some more help than the other groups of families,” Elizabeth says. “They, uh, were farmers and don’t have many job skills. They haven’t learned English as fast. Hmm, oh, and you should know they came from a polygamous society. So, they know it is not allowed here, but the State Department said they would resettle single wives in the same areas as all the fathers. There’s still some of it going on. Just last week there was a baby born by a father who also lives with another family.”

“All you have to do is go once a week and help them read their mail and help them speak English. Many volunteers become good friends with their families. I bet you will become good friends.” Then we set up an appointment for her to introduce me to the family.

“Oh, and they are good Christians, you know,” she adds as I’m leaving. This detail will confuse me for quite some time.

The following week, we’re supposed to meet at the Manchester Block at 6 p.m. I wait in my car for a half hour. At 6:30 p.m., I’m about to twist my key in the ignition, when a sedan glares its headlights into my rearview mirror, and then parks in front of me. Elizabeth scrambles out of the car in office heels and a long, wool coat.

“Oh. Hi. Um. Yes. So sorry I’m late,” she stutters, leading me up a concrete stoop. “I was still. Um. At the office. And. Oh, yes. How are you? I’m so glad you’re here. Oh, the family is going to be so happy.”

She rings the doorbell, triggering pounding feet, muffled shouts, and a pair of brown eyes blinking at us through the mail slot. Then the green door opens and we’re

greeted by a girl wearing a white doily-dress and a scarf around her head, tied at the back of her neck.

“Hi, how are you? May we come in?” Elizabeth asks, bending to her height, then straightening and heeling past her. The girl stretches her arm towards me, offering a handshake.

“Hi, how are you?” I say, taking her hand, which is so limp that we don’t really shake—we squeeze our hands together.

“Fine,” she says, smiling curiously, showing square adult teeth that she hasn’t grown into yet. Her proper English impresses me. I usually say “good” when someone asks how I’m doing.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Zeynab.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I notice her brother is standing on a step behind her, and then glance upwards to see several more siblings coming down a narrow staircase. Elizabeth has almost reached the top. *How many children are there?* I wonder. Slowly, I climb upwards, stopping every few steps to squeeze hands, smile, and exchange a dialog of “How are you?” and “Fine” with each of the kids. I feel overwhelmed by the new names: Zeynab, Ali, Hamadi, Asha. I know I won’t be able to remember them until I memorize the spellings.

When I reach the top of the staircase, a diapered toddler is waiting and even he knows to hold his hand out for a squeeze. I don’t know any American 2-year-olds who shake hands. He doesn’t smile, but stares at me the way babies do before they learn it’s taboo. One of his siblings tells me his name is Hussein.

In the kitchen, a young woman, probably in her late teens, is stirring on the stove. She's wearing a maroon velour top, stitched with gold embroidery, and she lets the wooden spoon drop against the side of the rusty pot when she sees me. We exchange the established greetings and she introduces herself as Halima. Standing by the refrigerator is their father, a man with a boyish face, wearing a T-shirt and blue sarong around his waist.

"Now, you are Hassan?" Elizabeth asks him, forcefully. He responds quietly in a dense accent.

"WHAT?" she shouts.

"I am Chechaka-Asha," he repeats.

"Oh, I got the houses mixed up!" she coos to me in fake-voice. "Well, we're already here so you'll just have to look after two families. Oh, I hope you don't mind."

During my interview with her, she mentioned there were two Somali families in this neighborhood that needed help, but she didn't want me to be overwhelmed by both. In later phone conversations, she only mentioned "family" in the singular form. I'm fine with helping everyone, but I'm annoyed that she seems to have "tricked" me.

After I shake hands with the father, Elizabeth and I are directed—"sit, sit"—to two wooden dining chairs in the living room. White paint is the only décor. Three sons and two daughters settle on the floor against the opposite wall, creating a gap between us. The eldest daughter, who appears to be fulfilling the mother-role, is still busy in the kitchen. Chechaka-Asha stands against the far wall, shifting weight from foot to foot.

"Where is the mother?" Elizabeth asks. Slowly, Chechaka-Asha forms his English response.

"Mame-Asha is working."

“Oh, GOOD,” she replies. Asha, wearing a dress checkered in bold blues and yellows, approaches carrying a glass pie plate that she’s using as a tray for two mugs. Her hair is divided into twisted rows and she has round cheeks that mound at the bone.

Elizabeth and I thank her, each taking our mug of orange juice. Then Elizabeth jabbars away, explaining that I’ll be coming once a week to teach English or read their mail or help the kids with homework. Chechaka-Asha nods and appears to understand.

“Should she call you or can she just come?” Elizabeth asks. Chechaka-Asha hesitates.

“She’ll call before she comes,” she decides. “Give her your phone number.”

Embarrassed, I realize I didn’t bring a pen or paper. Chechaka-Asha finds a notebook and pencil, then he spells his name and number for me as I write it down. I ask him if Wednesday is an okay night for him to come. He says that’s fine.

“Do all the children have winter coats?” Elizabeth asks. Now Chechaka-Asha looks puzzled.

“DO ALL THE CHILDREN HAVE WINTER COATS?”

“WINTER COATS?”

“Coat,” I say, tugging on my puffy red and white ski jacket.

“Yes, yes,” he nods, finally understanding. Abruptly, Elizabeth stands up and announces that we’re going to see the family next door. Chechaka-Asha speaks to Asha, the daughter in the checkered dress, who then picks up the phone, dials, and speaks in their language to the other line.

“Their doorbell not working,” he says, pointing at the wall.



“Oh my,” Elizabeth says, and then promises to notify the maintenance men. We heel-toe down the stairs.

Although some of Pittsburgh’s Catholic Charities’ polices haven’t worked out well, and some of their staff isn’t always on top of things, the organization still does an extraordinary job of welcoming foreigners and getting them set up with survival tools. The caseworkers usually have client case-loads of at least 200 people and they work long hours with paperwork for schools and jobs and housing and taxes and utilities. Sometimes, the U.S. State Department only gives the organization 24 hours notice before telling them that a new family is coming to town. And, originally, the department had told Catholic Charities that 50 more Somali Bantu families would be sent to Pittsburgh. This never materialized, but when Catholic Charities estimated housing for all those people, they assumed that the Manchester Block would be filled with a whole community of Somali Bantu people. Instead, there were just the two families that Elizabeth introduced me to.

Before I visit Chechaka-Asha’s family by myself for the first time, I call the family like Elizabeth suggested.

“Hell-o,” a female voice answers, along with baby babbles and kitchen clamors and indecipherable commotion.

“Hi, it’s Cara. From Catholic Charities. I’m coming tonight. Is that okay?” The voice says something, but it’s not in English.

“Hello?” I say. The family clatter continues, with no response. I’m pretty sure there’s no background noise from my end of the line, unless the plants in my apartment have started singing.

“Hell-o” a male voice says, a few moments later.

“Hi, Chechaka-Asha? It’s Cara ... the volunteer from Catholic Charities ... I’m coming tonight ... Is that okay?” I try to speak slow enough so that he can understand, but not so lethargically that I insult his intelligence.

“Hmm?” he hums, raising the pitch of a guttural sound into a question, indicating that he doesn’t understand.

“Can I visit tonight?”

“Mmm, ya,” he says, although I’m not sure if he knows what he’s agreeing to.

“Okay, see you soon. Bye.”

When I stand in front of his green door, waiting for someone to answer the bell, I feel nervous about how our meeting will go. We didn’t interact much last time, on account of Elizabeth. I don’t know what they’re expecting of me.

Finally, I hear pounding feet, and catch a glimpse of eyes through the mail slot. This time, a boy wearing khaki pants and a T-shirt answers. It’s Ali. We greet the same way we did last week—hand squeeze, smile, how-are-you, fine—a ritual I repeat four times as I climb the stairs. This time, Mame-Asha is here. Her smile reveals a gap between her front teeth, and she’s wearing a red and black scarf on her head, knotted in front, a sign of marriage. Her hands are cracked and leathery, a sign of the labors of womanhood.

She and several of the children command for me to relax—"Sit, sit"—and I'm ushered to a worn chartreuse chair in the living room. All eyes bore into me, waiting to see what I'll do. Luckily, I brought a grocery bag of all the child-friendly things I could find in my apartment. I pull *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* and a Jenga-style block game out of the bag, which are both immediately grabbed by small, eager hands.

"I want to write down everyone's names, so I can learn them," I say, opening my notebook. The kids are already paging through the book, looking at drawings of the cat with a red-and-white top hat, and examining the can of blocks, which—amazingly—they haven't opened. One by one, I ask each person their name, repeating it until my pronunciation is correct. Chechaka-Asha and Asha assist with spelling. Beside each name, I write the color of the shirt the person is wearing.

"Okay, can I take a photo?" I ask, planning to use the image to memorize names and faces. Seeing the camera, Mame-Asha shouts orders in Kizigua, and the children scamper in opposite directions, past the kitchen or upstairs to the bedrooms. They're back in seconds, tossing shoes and clean shirts onto the floor. The boy who answered the door in a white T-shirt changes into a powder-blue polo. I wonder how I will match names with faces. Halima pulls pink shorts on the toddler, lifting and twisting him like he's a doll, while Asha whisks into the living room wearing a red-checkered dress, and the mother grabs the telephone to pose with it. Zeynab is hammering boots onto her four-year-old brother's feet. Chechaka-Asha, sitting next to me, remains idle.

Finally, everyone is dressed properly and the mother corrals the children and Chechaka-Asha against the wall. I raise my camera.

"Ready, smile. Three ... two ... one."

Flash.

I capture the mother holding a phone to her ear, the blue-collared boy running toward the camera with a tennis ball, and expressions ranging from a silly stare to a half-smile to a grin.

“Now we take picture. You and me,” Asha says, pointing at me and then to her chest. I say I’ll take one with her and all of her brothers and sisters. I show Chechaka-Asha how to point-and-shoot and the kids rush to gather around me, although they still maintain a foot-length of distance. Chechaka-Asha snaps a photo and I promise to bring copies of the pictures next week.

“Okay, let’s play a game,” I say, picking up the blue can and turning it upside-down on an end table. Slowly, I pull the can off to reveal a tower of wooden blocks, and everyone stares, wondering. I demonstrate how to gently slide a block out of its spot, and then add it to the top of the tower.

“If it falls, you lose,” I explain. Chechaka-Asha is intrigued and he pulls a block out and sets it on top. Easy. It’s the perfect game for people who don’t share a language.

“Me! Me!” the blue-collared boy shouts, reaching for the tower. I wait for it to crash.

“Whey!” his father shouts, which I assume means “no” or “stop.” The tower is saved. One by one, everyone loosens a piece and places it on top— except for the youngest boys, who are being yelled at and pushed away from the teetering structure. Finally, one of them bumps the table hard enough that the tower tumbles and blocks scatter onto the floor. It was probably only standing for a minute. I realize this isn’t the perfect game for children.

“Okay, let’s read the book now,” I say, squatting on the floor and grabbing the book with the Cat in the Hat snowshoeing across the cover. The children form a semi-circle around me, and I motion for their parents to join us, but they seem content to sit across the room and listen. The first page illustrates two children shoveling snow.

“That’s snow,” I say, pointing to the picture. “Are you excited to see snow? It will be coming soon.” They all nod their heads. Then I begin reading, holding the book to my side so I can read and display the pictures. The story details how the Cat in the Hat, in his own quirky way, helps two kids clean up the snow. I’m not sure how much the kids understand, but I figure it’s good for them to hear the vowels and consonants of English words. They enjoy looking at drawings of the cat eating cake in a bathtub and Seuss-creatures running in the snow.

Asha and Ali have stopped fighting over who is taking algebra next year, and who is smart enough to do it. On the love seat, Mame-Asha is preparing yarn for her embroidery. She unravels a piece of red yarn from an oblong yarn ball and stretches it at an arm’s length, then bites it with her teeth to cut it. Then she slices the piece with her fingernail, causing the yarn to coil and bunch into a funky, full shape.

“Miss Cara,” she calls, then puts her finger on her nostril. “Nose. Nose.”

“You’re ready to get it done?” I ask.

“Ya,” she says.

“Is everything OK with your diabetes?” I ask. I haven’t seen her take insulin or test her blood in awhile. Sally has been helping her with paperwork to apply for disability funds from the government.

“Good, ya, good,” she says.

“Me too,” Asha says. “I want to pierce my nose, too.”

“You have to be 16, remember?”

“Yeah, I’ll be 16 in December!” she says.

“Weeki ukwiza?” Mame-Asha asks, wondering if I can take her to the Flying Monkey parlor next week.

“Yeah, maybe,” I say. “We’ll go soon.”

As I get up to leave, the kids help to gather all of the books and puzzles for the toy bag. Chechaka-Asha, who has been checking the spam in his hotmail account on the computer in the tent-room, has an announcement to make.

“No job,” he says. He has been working at a hotel as a janitor.

“No job?” I ask.

“No. They had too many people working and not enough to do,” he says with a sigh. “I will go to the unemployment office tomorrow.”

The six kids are silent. Mame-Asha keeps working with her yarn. Hopefully her disabilities funds come through soon.

## Chapter 7

### Worth

In January of 2008, several months after the roadtrip to Buffalo, Yusuf's proposal to Asha is still under negotiation.

"Yusuf want to marry Asha," his brother Ahmed tells me, while we're sitting in his family's tent-room. Yusuf could speak for himself, but he often defers to his younger brother. Mame-Yusuf has 10 living children, most of whom are spaced every two years or less. The three oldest are boys. After the three sons, there's a longer interval between the children, which, in Somali Bantu families, often indicates a death. In this case, it was

a son who died only two days after Mame-Yusuf reached the refugee camps in Dadaab. He'd been malnourished for too long. Then, Mame-Yusuf has a daughter, another son, and then five more girls.

Of the three oldest boys, Yusuf is in the middle and he acts like a moody middle child. Unlike the other two, he hasn't been particularly motivated to improve his English or seek out better jobs. He dropped out of high school after less than a year to work at a laundry company, which was a very rational decision considering his family's income needs. He was only eligible to attend high school for two years anyway because people can't attend public school in the U.S. after age 21. Since he had little school experience in the camps, it would've been extremely difficult for him to earn a diploma. Still, he might have gained some skills to help him eventually earn a GED or get a better job or navigate daily life American better. He said he would learn English at home from his brother. So far, he hasn't made much progress.

Even though Yusuf took the minimum wage job (\$6.50 per hour) to support the family, he spends much of his income on a cell phone and on cable TV so he can watch international soccer tournaments. At home, he sleeps or downloads music on a computer, and expects, or rather *demands*, that the women in the family will take care of all things domestic. When his parents are home, they ask him to play the Internet BBC Swahili news station for them. Most of the time he complies. Sometimes, he doesn't. It depends on how he feels.

Tonight, he's sitting on a wooden dining chair on front of the computer and half-watching the television. He's wearing baggy jeans that he has to cinch at the waist with a rope. Like many Somali men, his waist is less than 30 inches in circumference.



His mother, Mame-Yusuf, is on the couch working on her embroidery. Ahmed and I are on the floor, where we had been reviewing his science homework. He's doing so well in school that he's been inducted into the National Honor Society. Now he's doing his job as the family spokesman.

"Sally say they can't get married because there is a problem with the law," Ahmed says.

"She tell Chechaka-Asha that last week," he continues, referring to Asha's father. "We want to talk to Sally about this." His voice is irritated and I can tell that he thinks Sally is undermining the marriage.

"Miss Cara, why would it be a problem with the law?"

"Well maybe it has something to do with Asha's age," I say. "I think she is too young. I think you have to be eighteen to get married."

"Ya, but many girls get married before they're eighteen," he says. It's true, there have been several marriages with Pittsburgh high school girls lately, girls who are younger than 18. The pact the girls made doesn't seem to have held up for long.

"Well, maybe you have to have parental permission if you are younger. Let's look it up online," I say. Ahmed offers me the computer chair and I type in a search for "Pennsylvania marriage law." I scroll through the first Web page that pops up.

"Ok, see, it says you have to be eighteen to get married by yourself," I say, pointing at a block of text on [usmarriagelaws.com](http://usmarriagelaws.com). "But if you are sixteen, you can get married if your parents approve. And if you are younger than that, then you have to go to court to get permission." Ahmed explains all of this to Mame-Yusuf.

"How old is Asha?" Ahmed asks.

“Um, fifteen or sixteen. Wait, she is sixteen. She just had her birthday in December,” I say, suddenly wishing I’d kept my mouth shut.

“So she is sixteen,” Yusuf says, finally joining in on the conversation.

“Yeah, I think so. Her father would have to sign something,” I say, then tack on a last note: “But I really think she should finish high school.”

“She can go to school and be married,” Ahmed says.

In Somalia, Asha’s age wouldn’t have been an issue. At age fifteen or sixteen without school to attend, there was no reason why teen girls shouldn’t get married. Afterall, Mame-Asha and Mame-Yusuf were both married around age fourteen. But here in the United States, where the concept of adolescence has been around for more than a century and the educational and legal systems encourage students to delay marriage, Asha is viewed as a child.

She too considers herself a child, too young for marriage. I think back to the car ride and her telling me about her pact with her friends. Maybe I should help her. It’s mystifying to me that she has so little control of the situation. I imagine myself at sixteen, having to deal with a marriage proposal being decided by my father and an old neighbor. Ugh. I have an idea, another loophole.

“Well, maybe the problem is Yusuf is too old,” I say, then ask him how old he is.

“Twenty-two,” he says.

“Maybe the problem is that you’re older than twenty-one, and she is younger than eighteen. She is a minor and adults can’t get married to minors.”

Ahmed and Yusuf seem confused.

“We want to talk to Sally. Tell her we need to talk to her,” Ahmed finally says. Yusuf is willing to pay for Asha’s hand in marriage.

The next morning, I send Sally an email outlining our conversation. She replies several hours later with two important factors regarding the marriage proposal: One, she is certain Asha just turned fifteen, not sixteen. Two, she thinks Yusuf is not legally divorced from his Ohio wife.

The next time I visit, I address both issues. Yusuf and Ahmed are again sitting by the computer and Mame-Yusuf is on the couch, working her embroidery.

“Did Sally come? Did you talk to her?” I ask, after handing off a toy bag to the younger kids.

“No, she did not come,” Ahmed says.

“Oh, well she has been busy,” I say. “She will come soon. But I made a mistake, Asha is fifteen, not sixteen.”

“Fifteen?” Yusuf says.

“Yeah, I thought she just turned sixteen because she wants me to take her to get her nose pierced and you have to be sixteen to get it done. She told me she was sixteen, but she is not.” A couple months later, Amina saved her money and she asked me to take her to the piercing place again. In the meantime, Asha kept telling me that she was turning sixteen in December, and then we could go get her nose pierced, when, in reality she was only turning fifteen. But she had mentioned it so often that I believed she was turning sixteen.

“Yeah, sorry, she is fifteen,” I say. Ahmed explains everything to Mame-Yusuf.

“Nose, sixteen,” I say, putting my finger on the side of my nose.

“So you have to be sixteen to get your nose pierced?” Ahmed asks for Mame-Yusuf.

“Ya.” Mame-Yusuf nods, forgetting about Yusuf’s marriage problems for a moment. She calls her eldest daughter, Tukera, out of the kitchen, who brings me a water bottle and orange pop.

“Tukera, sixteen,” Mame-Yusuf says, pointing at her daughter, then at her nose piercing. “You, Tukera. Nose.” Tukera looks startled and confused. Ahmed and Mame-Yusuf catch her up on the conversation.

“She say when Tukera turns sixteen, you and Tukera can go get your noses pierced together,” Ahmed says.

“Me?” I say.

“Ya, you pierce your nose, too,” Ahmed says as Mame-Yusuf eyes me and points at the gold stud in her nose.

“Ha, well I don’t know about me,” I say.

“Miss Cara, Tukera. Nose!” Mame-Yusuf says again excitedly.

“No,” Tukera says, hiding her nose with her hand. Yusuf and Ahmed laugh at their sister’s reaction.

“You don’t want to get it done?” I ask Tukera.

“No. It will hurt.” Then she says something to Mame-Yusuf in Kizigua. Mame-Yusuf scoffs at her daughter, indicating she thinks that her daughter is a whimp and that if she decides her daughter should get her nose pierced, it will be done.

“When did you get your nose pierced?” I ask Mame-Yusuf. She hasn’t always had the gold stud in her nose, but I can’t quite remember when it appeared. Ahmed speaks with his mother.

“She say she get it done in Africa when she was a baby. She doesn’t remember.”

“Oh, but she wasn’t wearing that one when we first met,” I say.

“Yeah, she get that one maybe like nine months or a year ago,” Ahmed says. “But she have her nose pierced and jewelry in it before.”

“Oh, ok.”

Mame-Yusuf concentrates on her embroidery and Yusuf watches a movie on TV. We’ve come to a lull in the excitement over nose piercing and I think about the other marriage factor that I need to tell them about.

“Well, I emailed with Nancy, and she doesn’t know if Yusuf has a divorce yet,” I say, then ask Yusuf directly: “Are you divorced?”

“No.”

“Well you have to get papers to divorce your first wife before you marry another one.”

“I have no papers,” he says.

“Well, I think you have to go to the court to get papers,” I say.

“But we are not married.”

“But the government doesn’t know that. You know how you had to sign a marriage license when you and Madina got married? That means the government thinks you’re married.”

“But I have no paper, no license,” Yusuf says.

“Ya, he don’t have a marriage license,” Ahmed adds.

“You didn’t sign anything? Did you sign something at the wedding in Columbus?”

“No, I don’t sign a license,” he says.

“So you never really got married in the first place. You just had the ceremony.”

“Ya.”

“Ok. Well maybe you should ask your wife in Ohio if she has any papers.”

“No, I have no papers.”

“Ok, well you can figure this out with Sally when she comes. She’s a lawyer, you know. She will know how to look up marriage licenses in Ohio and can find it if it’s there.”

“I have no papers.”

Yusuf’s whole marriage is a confusing situation, incomprehensible even to him.

When I was visiting several months before, I noticed an empty chair by the computer and asked where he was.

“Columbus,” Ahmed said.

“Oh, with his wife?”

“Ya.”

“Is she coming here?”

“I don’t know.” Recently, when I mentioned the oddness of Yusuf’s supposed marriage to Sally, she suspected that there could be a financial dispute.

“Is there a problem with money?” I ask.

“No,” Ahmed says.

“Does Yusuf have to pay money to his wife’s family?” I ask, following up on something Sally mentioned about a bride payment.

“Ya.”

“Really. How much does he have to pay?”

“Four-thousand dollars.”

“What?”

“Four-thousand dollars.”

“That is a lot of money!” I wonder how young Somali men are supposed to pay that when they still have to pay the government for their plane ticket to the United States, not to mention rent and utilities for their apartments. Plus, many of them have cell phones. Yusuf makes \$6 or \$7 an hour. That can’t possibly cover everything.

“So if you get married, do you have to pay the wife’s family four-thousand dollars?” I ask Hamadi.

“Ya, I need four-thousand to buy a wife. Everybody has to pay that.”

“Tukera,” Mame-Yusuf says, nodding towards her daughter. “Four thousand.” So, Tukera is worth four thousand dollars, I think. I look at the five youngest siblings, all girls, and wonder if Mame-Yusuf and Hussein will finance their retirement through their daughters’ marriages.

“Miss Cara, you, money?” Mame-Yusuf asks.

“How much money will a husband pay for you?” Hamadi explains.

“Nothing,” I say. “No money.”

“Ah!” Mame-Yusuf squeals. “No money?”

“No, a man wouldn’t pay my parents. He would have to buy me a ring though,” I say while pointing at my finger. I lean over to where Hamadi is sitting and turn a vocabulary booklet towards me. Earlier tonight, he was writing the Kizigua names next to objects in English vocabulary cards.

“*Faranti*,” I say, using the Kizigua term for ring. “A ring could cost four-thousand dollars.”

“In Africa it was less,” Hamadi says of the bride price. “But since we come to America they make it a higher price.” I’m not sure who “they” is, but four thousand dollars seems to be the going rate for all Somali Bantu brides living in the United States.

“How much did it cost in Africa?” I ask. Hamadi looks at his mother, they consult, and then Hamadi rolls his eyes toward the sparkly garland on the ceiling of the tent room while he figures out the currency conversion in his head.

“Maybe like one-hundred-fifty dollars. It was a lot of money there.”

“So do you have to pay this all at once?”

“No, you pay like a little bit every month.” Oh. I wonder how long it will take Yusuf to pay off this wife. A year? 10 years?

Mame-Yusuf is still amazed that there is no bride price for me.

“No money?” she says again.

“No money,” I say. “You can’t buy me.” The word “buy” sounds particularly disconcerting. Plus, it concerns me that parents receive the money. So they can literally sell off their daughters, I think. Maybe that’s why the girls marry so early—because the parents want the money sooner. I feel very cynical about it all, and then Hamadi interrupts my thoughts.



“My mother say I should marry an American girl so I don’t have to pay any money,” he says half-jokingly. There could be serious complications of this impending cultural clash. Soon, American girls might be “worth” more than Somali girls because they are “free.” How will the Somali girls compete? Perhaps Mame-Yusuf won’t be supported by any of her son-in-laws. For Mame-Yusuf, the clash could result in pennies disappearing for her retirement. Still, I’m certain her sons and daughters will make she’s OK. Like Asha’s family and other Somali Bantus around the country, they count their wealth by people and family. The sort of kinships they established through war and starvation is probably why their favorite story in the toy bag that I bring when I visit is *There Were No Mirrors in My Nana’s House*.

Mame-Yusuf’s tent-room is toasty on a winter night in January 2007. Her family is still living in the Manchester Block, next door to Asha’s house. The thermostat must be set to 80 degrees, I think, as I push up the sleeves of my fleece sweatshirt. Mame-Yusuf is embroidering a pillowcase with yarn. A pattern of leaves and flowers has been drawn on the pillowcase with ink, and now Mame-Yusuf is filling in a flower petal with red yarn. The leaves and flower petals are pointy and narrow, not round and bubbly like the daisies my mother doodles. I note that Mame-Yusuf is sitting up instead of lying down, like she often is when I visit. She also looks content and busy. It occurs to me that her moods have lightened considerably since she took up this sewing hobby several months ago.

Yusuf is on the computer with his back to everyone and his brother Dadeeri is curled in the corner of a couch. His sister Tukera appears to be attempting homework.

The little sisters have strewn vocabulary cards from my toy bag across the floor and are pulling out wooden blocks and shoelaces to add to the mess. I grab a new children's book from the bag before it gets buried in the shuffle.

"Mazina, let's read this," I say to one of the girls, a 9-year-old. Together, we read the story of a black girl who doesn't know she's growing up in impoverished conditions. Her grandmother provides her with all the love and happiness she needs.

"Ok, now we can sing the book!" I say, a little mischievously, while Mazina looks at me curiously. I pull a CD from a flap on the inside cover and pop it into the stereo that sits on Mame-Yusuf's dining table, which has never been used for eating purposes. When I press play, a woman's voice cuts through the noise and busyness of the Royal Tent Room.

"There were no mirrors in my Nana's house," the voice sings in a simple melody, while other women's voices harmonize the tune. Mame-Yusuf holds her sewing needle still and all the sisters stop playing and look up at the stereo. I point to the words in the book, flipping pages quickly to keep up with the music, while the girls and Dadeeri crowd around me.

The song is being sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock, an African American women's acapella group that had recently stopped in Pittsburgh on tour. I attended Sweet Honey's performance and heard them sing *No Mirrors* live. In the concert hall lobby, a vendor was selling a children's book that had been created from the lyrics to the song. I bought it to share with Mame-Yusuf's family.

While running my finger underneath the words in the book, I begin to quietly sing along, unsure of my voice. No one laughs at me like I think they will, and some of the girls even begin humming along until the song fades into silence.

The next track on the CD is a reading of the book by the author and Sweet Honey singer, Ysaye Barnwell. Her voice is deep and booming and dramatic.

“There were NO mirrors in my nana’s house. NO mirrors, in my nana’s house!” she reads. “So the beauty that I saw in everything, the beauty in everything, was in her eyes, like the rising of the sun!”

The kids laugh every time the woman says “NO” and the way the volume of her voice crescendos at the end of each phrase.

“I was intrigued by the cracks in the wall,” the author continues. “I tasted with joy the dust that would fall. The noise in the hallway was music to me. The trash and the rubbish just cushioned my feet.”

When the author finishes reading, the Sweet Honey song plays again. This time, everybody gets into the music. Dadeeri plays air guitar, even though there isn’t a guitar in the song and it sounds more like gospel music than rock. The girls dance, the untied waist-ribbons on their dresses flapping about, and they sing along, even though they haven’t figured out the words yet. Yusuf even turns away from the computer to watch us. Hamadi comes down from his bedroom to see what all the commotion is. Then, I hear Mame-Yusuf singing, too. She lifts Lucky onto her feet and swings her in a baby dance.

Over and over again, we play the CD and we sing the chorus extra loud: “There were no mirrors in my Nana’s house, no mirrors in my Nana’s house!” Eleven of us are now movin’ and groovin’ in the warm tent room with hot-pink drapes and garland and

Arabic scrolls. At one point, I hear Asinina yell: “There were no mirrors in banana’s house!” Banana’s house? Oh, dear.

“No, no, Nana is another word for grandma or grandmother,” I say. “See, look at the pictures in the book. Here is a girl and here is her grandma. There are no mirrors in grandma’s house.” Asinina looks at me with a little smirk and continues singing about banana’s house. I guess banana is a lot more fun to say. (She still sings it that way.)

When things quiet down after the 10th round of the sing-along, I bring the book over to Mame-Yusuf. She is delighted by the bright illustrations. The book has the same mix of colors as the yarn she uses when embroidering pillowcases or bed sheets.

“Good, Miss Cara. Good,” she says, tracing the character of the grandmother. All of the characters in the book have brown skin and loose, solid-color clothing. The grandmother has short, black hair and wears a big, red dress, similar to the tunics that Mame-Yusuf wears. This is artwork that Mame-Yusuf can relate to, artwork that she can see herself in.

“Grandmother,” I say, pointing to the Nana character. I don’t think Mame-Yusuf knows the English word, so I think of a way to help her understand.

“Hassani, Maria, Hussein,” I say, reciting the names of her three grandchildren. Then I point to her. “You, grandmother to Hassani, Maria, Hussein.”

“Ahh, Hassani, Maria, Hussein,” Mame-Yusuf says, then points to herself. “Me. Grandmother.”

“Yes, yes,” I say. Then I point to the girl in the book.

“Granddaughter.”

“Baby,” Mame-Yusuf says.

“Yes, baby,” I say, realizing that this is the only word she knows for a child, no matter what age.

“Grandmother, baby. Grandmother, baby,” I say, pointing to both characters. Mame-Yusuf nods. We’re getting somewhere.

“Baby look to grandmother’s eyes,” I say, making a peace sign with my fingers and pointing to both my eyes.

“Eyes,” Mame-Yusuf says while pointing to her own.

“Baby love grandma,” I say while hugging myself.

“Ya,” Mame-Yusuf says, then smiles genuinely. “Good, good!”

I take her “good, good” to mean that she understands the essence of the story. Success! It’s hard to communicate stories when there are only a few words to work with, but at least the themes of stories are universal. Love and grandmothers is something everyone can grasp.

The *No Mirrors* song is still playing softly on the stereo. Tukera brings me an orange pop from the kitchen and I plop on the couch and take a sip. I feel so glad that I brought the book. I hadn’t put much thought into it when I bought it—the pictures were colorful and had black characters in them, and the Sweet Honey singers had been performing some excellent music—so I picked it up. I hadn’t imagined that it would lead to tonight’s enthusiastic sing-along.

Singing and reading the words here in the Royal Tent Room also makes me realize how appropriate the theme of the book is. There probably weren’t any mirrors in Mame-Yusuf’s Nana’s hut in Somalia. Mame-Yusuf’s mother still lives in Somalia, and there’s a good chance that the maternal grandmother of Tukera and Dadeeri, etc., doesn’t

have any mirrors either. There are only bathroom mirrors in Mame-Yusuf's Pittsburgh row house. And there are plenty of wall cracks and dust and noise and rubbish here.

In the song, the phrase "no mirrors" also serves as a metaphor for the fact that the girl doesn't yet see how the world might view her because of her race and social class. Mame-Yusuf's youngest daughters might not see it yet, either. How they're viewed in the States is also different from how they would've been viewed in Somalia. They might still be at the bottom of U.S. society, but at least here there is hope for them to climb, unlike in Somalia where they would've been denied schooling because of their rural environment, poverty, and slave background.

As an oral, musical story, *No Mirrors*, also reflects Mame-Yusuf's spoken language. Perhaps that's why the book is such a hit with her family—because the words are meant to be sung.

For the umpteenth time that evening, I hear the Sweet Honey voices on the CD sing: "Cause the beauty that I saw in everything, the beauty in everything, was in her eyes, like the rising of the sun was in her eyes, oooh, oooh, oooh, oooh."

"Ahmed, can you help me?" I ask. He's hanging out on the couch now, too.

"Can you tell your mom what this means?" I say, opening a page of the book.

"The beauty that the girl sees everywhere is like her grandmother's eyes. The grandmothers eyes look like a rising sun."

Ahmed speaks to his mother in Kizigua. She watches him and me with wide-eyes, the slightly frightened look she has when she's trying to figure out yet another new concept.

"Eyes," I say, pointing at my eyes with my peace sign again.

“Ya, eyes,” she replies, with the same gesture, as though we’re a baseball pitcher and catcher sending signals across a diamond. I’m a little concerned that “the rising of the sun was in her eyes” didn’t translate well. Taken literally, that could be scary. It makes me think of a gothic girl I once saw wearing contacts with lightening bolts zagging across her pupils. Or it could be beautiful, just like the song says, to watch all the hints of color and movement and soulness that are present in both eyes and sunsets.

For Mame-Yusuf, I imagine that it would be wonderful if she could show her grandchildren, and children, the world that she knows through her eyes. As they adapt and assimilate to American culture, she may be able to look them in the eyes and show them where they came from, and what beauty is like in another part of the world.

Tukera isn’t quite so sentimental about the book. When I show it to her, she laughs about the illustrations.

“She look like monkey,” she says about the girl in the book.

“Aww, no, she doesn’t look like a monkey,” I say. Tukera keeps laughing.

“Okay, read it,” I say. She reads the book aloud as though she’s trying not to read aloud. Her voice is caught in a gurgle in her throat. This is how she always reads.

“I never knew that my skin was too black. I never knew that my nose was too flat. I never knew that my clothes didn’t fit. I never knew there were things that I missed.”

I cringe. When singing the song, I hummed and pretended I had forgotten the words to the part about the girl’s skin being too black and her nose too flat. That was sending the wrong message, especially if I, a white person said it. Those lines made me feel very uncomfortable and I wondered if it might be reason enough to take the book away. Yet everyone clearly loved the song, and many of them didn’t really know the

words. Was I being too sensitive about those lines? I'd heard the kids tease each other about looking too black before, which was a painful example of how deep racism and self-deprecation had been ingrained in them. Yet when they teased like that, it always seemed like a funny joke that didn't mean harm. Once, when Yusuf teased Mazina about her skin, I said, "No, you shouldn't say that, Mazina is beautiful!" My comment only made everyone laugh harder, as though I had said it sarcastically.

Tukera is still reading in her guttural way, and I'm relieved that we're past the awkward part, a relief I experience every time we read or sing the book. She finishes with a repeated phrase that fades into whispers in the song.

"Chil' look deep into my eyes, Chil' look deep into my eyes, Chil' look deep into my eyes."

"Miss Cara," Mame-Yusuf calls. I look over to see her openly breastfeeding Lucky, who is now big enough to sit on her mother's lap and suck.

"House no good!" Mame-Yusuf says, and continues speaking in Kizigua.

"We want to find a new house," Hamadi says.

"Oh, why?"

"We want to go to Lawrenceville," he says, referring to the Pittsburgh neighborhood where the other Somali Bantu families live.

"We can look on the computer," I say. Ahmed kicks Yusuf off the computer and offers me the chair.

"Look, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*," I say, typing the name of a local newspaper into Google. I show Ahmed where I click on "real estate" and then search for houses for rent



in Lawrenceville. Several entries come up. It's a cheap area, and there are three-bedroom row houses going for \$600 and up. Ahmed reads some of the entries off to his mother.

"She say we need five bedrooms," Ahmed says. The family could use even more rooms than that with nine kids in the house, but I know that it would be very difficult to find a place that large which they could afford.

"There's no five bedrooms," I say. "There's a four bedroom. It's a thousand a month."

"Ah?!" Mame-Yusuf grunts when Ahmed translates the price.

"How much do you pay here again?" I ask Hamadi.

"Four-fifty," he says. Catholic Charities owns this building, so the rate is more reasonable for a family depending on minimum wages.

"So you want something around \$600," I say. "Can you pay it?"

"Ya, Yusuf and me and my father can pay," he says. All three of them work at a laundry services company now. Hussein and Yusuf work full-time and Ahmed works on weekends since he's still in high school.

"Well, why don't we write these down," I say, looking at the ads. "It's too late to call now, but you can call tomorrow." It's already 10 p.m. and everyone is looking tired, me included. Some of the kids are sniffing with the beginnings of colds. I know I shouldn't be here this late on a school night, but there always seems to be a lot to do. On the back of an outdated school announcement, I write down the number of bedrooms, prices, and phone numbers for the housing ads.

"You can go to this site tomorrow and see if there are anymore listings," I say. Then, while stepping over dozing children, I pick up the toys that have been flung across

the carpet and shove them back in my bag. I grab my CD and put it back in the book slot.

I wave goodbye and head down the stairs, humming the song.

*There were no mirrors in my Nana's house  
no mirrors in my Nana's house  
So the beauty that I saw in everything  
the beauty in everything  
was in her eyes  
like the rising of the sun*

*There were no mirrors in my Nana's house  
no mirrors in my Nana's house  
so I never knew that my skin was too black  
I never knew that my nose was too flat  
I never knew that my clothes didn't fit  
I never knew there were things that I missed  
'Cause the beauty in everything  
was in her eyes  
like the rising of the sun*

*There were no mirrors in my Nana's house  
no mirrors in my Nana's house  
I was intrigued by the cracks in the wall  
I tasted with joy the dust that would fall  
The noise in the hallway was music to me  
The trash and the rubbish just cushioned my feet  
And the beauty in everything  
was in her eyes  
like the rising of the sun  
was in her eyes*

*There were no mirrors in my Nana's house  
no mirrors in my Nana's house  
The world outside was a magical place  
I only knew love and I never knew hate  
And the beauty in everything  
was in her eyes  
like the rising of the sun*

*Chil' look deep into my eyes  
Chil' look deep into my eyes*

## Chapter 8

### Wedding

In a VFW hall in Sharpsburg, Pa., just across the Allegheny River from Lawrenceville, Asha dances the geera in a line of girls at a wedding. She's wearing a royal blue Indian outfit that she shopped for with her aunt during her last visit to Buffalo, and is shaking in place to African pop music.

Three hundred Somali Bantu are gossiping or dancing or waiting in the buffet line at this celebration. In Somali Bantu culture, like in many small-town communal cultures, the whole village is invited to weddings. Everyone in the Pittsburgh community is here,

as well as relatives from Omaha, Neb., or Columbus, Ohio, and other cities around the country. Schoolteachers, Catholic Charities social workers, and other American volunteers—some who know the bride and groom, and some who don’t—are here, too. Knowing the bride or groom on a personal level isn’t really important. Mame-Asha and Mame-Yusuf and Sally all invited me to the wedding, though “invited” isn’t the correct term. They simply asked if I was going—and of course I should because everybody would be there.

Weddings, in terms of both the uniting of a couple and the party, are considered to be benefits for the whole community. The celebration focuses less on the individual couple than on the collective community. In fact, at this party, the couple hasn’t even arrived yet.

The hall looks like any standard civic hall—a drab low-ceilinged room with folding tables and chairs—but the room appears vibrant with the bright fabrics of women’s diracs and the loud colors of men’s baseball hats or puffy coats (it’s January). The mothers have claimed a sea of askew tables and Mame-Asha is among them, chattering loudly while her sons crawl under chairs and across the speckled-linoleum floor with their friends. On the other side of the dance floor, the men hang out near the speakers and video cameras, sans children. They don’t talk much or get too close to each other, just survey the scene.

Chechaka-Asha is standing against a wall, wearing jeans and a blue jacket, occasionally shifting his weight. At the buffet tables, men and women mix a bit, but then return to their respective sides. Americans of both genders mingle near the buffet tables,

somewhere in the middle of the obvious male-female divide, but closer to the women and children where most of the action is.

Chechaka-Asha ventures over to the buffet table, shyly approaching Sally who's squatting with her hands on her knees, asking two kids about school. When she sees Chechaka-Asha they shake hands. The kids mill around her legs for a moment, realize that she's now engrossed in adult conversation, and scamper off. Sally asks about the latest news of Chechaka-Asha's green card status and, to move out of the way of people scooping chicken and rice on their plates, or grabbing sodas, they shift to a back wall.

"Yusuf asked to marry Asha," he says, sweeping his arm toward the crowded room to indicate the wedding connection. "But I think maybe she is too young,"

"Um, yeah, I agree," Sally says. "Asha told me. She is young."

Chechaka-Asha looks surprised that Sally already knows, and that Asha has been discussing the proposal, but he doesn't say anything else.

Then, there's an imperceptible surge in the crowd as some people gather around the doorway. The bride and groom, along with their attendants, have finally arrived. They stand just inside the doorway, holding hands, and a few male guests snap photos with their new digital cameras or cell phones. Many of the guests simply glance over and then resume their conversations. The African pop music continues to play, though Asha and the other girls have cleared the dance floor since the couple of honor has arrived.

The bride and her maid of honor are wearing matching purple diracs with big flowers. Their head turbans are tightly wrapped and heavy gold jewelry hang from their ears and necks and wrists. Their outfits are traditional, though more expensive than what their mothers might have worn. They have added an American touch: enormous bug-eye

sunglasses. The groom and his best man are also wearing sunglasses, along with Western business suits, fedora hats, and neckties.

The entire bridal party looks appropriately morose. The women's heads are cocked downward and their faces are stony. The men are straight-faced serious. Nearby, an older woman waves a small, checkered flag that's been crafted out of thick yarn, stirring good blessings into the air.

Then, still holding hands, the bride and groom, followed by the maid of honor and best man, parade in circles around a dance floor, following a man with a videocamera. The woman with the checkered flag continues to follow and wave her instrument. The circles are slow and laborious. There's no joy in their steps. This is tradition. Marriage is a serious undertaking for a new couple. Brides are supposed to show sadness because they will be leaving their family and because, as Mame-Yusuf's son Ahmed once told me, she has to "do it" that night. The groom is allowed to smile and celebrate—but not too much. That would be improper.

The guests, however, are allowed to go wild. And some of them are. Behind the bride and groom, a mass of young women has formed a train, shaking their rumps in such a way that it looks like their buttocks are separate from the rest of their bodies. On the perimeters of the hall, silent men sit and watch. After several somber circles, the bride and groom sit at a head table that's been covered with a cloth embroidered in the same style that Mame-Asha sews.

The dance floor has now been opened up for the geera dancing. The men and women face each other and dance in separate lines, maintaining a distance of several feet in between. The women mostly dance in place, gyrating their rumps, while the men

straddle and swoop and occasionally dance toward the women (though they never touch them), and then dance backwards into the line. Most of the dancers are unmarried teenagers and they've generally arranged themselves in order by height and age. Asha is dancing a few girls over from Zeynab, who's wearing her headscarf in a gypsy ponytail like the other tween girls. Occasionally, when small children attempt to join in the dancing, they're scooted back to the mother's tables.

At the head of the lines of dancers, a tripod with a videocamera is set up. Every few minutes, a man named Chechaka-Muya checks to make sure it's recording properly. He's wearing a fishing vest with dozens of small pockets, which contain memory cards or electric cords or other electronic items that he might need. Occasionally, he shouts to the dancers to shift forward or backward a few steps, so that the lines are in view of the video camera. The recording will be passed around the country in the Somali Bantu network. People will play the full three-hour wedding tapes, mostly filled with lines of young male and female dancers, to look for family they know and to listen to the pop music.

Chechaka-Muya, an employee at Best Buy and thus the local expert on electronics, is also the president of the Pittsburgh Somali Bantu Community Organization. He's a short man with a chubb face and broad chest, whose body posture appears more relaxed and open than some other men. He was among the very first Somali Bantus to arrive in Pittsburgh, along with his wife and children. In a May 2004 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that documented the arrival of the refugees, he was quoted as saying, "I saw many killed in front of me, many blood. Now I think I'm in a new life."

Soon after other families arrived, they formed a group to support each other. Chechaka-Muya and his brother have led the group from the start. With the help of Sally,

they hold monthly Saturday morning meetings in the basement of the Lawrenceville library.

One Saturday, Chechaka-Muya stands at the head of a large rectangle created with several folding tables and gives a democratic address in Kizigua to the Pittsburgh Somali Bantu Community Association. Thirteen men, two women, and five Americans are present. Chechaka-Asha occasionally attends the meetings, but this morning he's not here.

"We must all respect each other," Chechaka-Muya pronounces as another man whispers translations in English for the American attendees. "We are very small here, but united we can be stronger. We can be stronger than you would ever be yourself. Some states already have strong Somali Bantu committees. Here, we are struggling to get one name so people know who we are."

The library basement is a large half-moon room set deep into a hillside. It's not a hall of power like any of our nation's government buildings, but a public place nonetheless, a spot for immigrants to figure out how to fit into the grand American democracy. Small windows border the top of the walls to let light in. Pale-pink paint is peeling off in spots and piles of boxes clutter the corners. Vertical pipes that hug the walls occasionally let out hisses and tap-tap-tapppppping sounds.

"Some people can't even write their names," Chechaka-Muya laments. "Education is the light in the darkness!" He's wearing a knit cap and a salmon-colored dress shirt. On the belt loops of his khaki pants, buttoned high around his waist, he's clipped a cell phone and a ring of keys.



“I have never been to school, but I learn from those who have been. We need to know how to speak English, to read. We have to divide our time and teach each other. For those people chosen to teach, they must show of themselves. Little by little, we will fill in the gaps. We will come together and fix what is wrong. If you see someone who gets off the way, tell him, ‘Don’t do that.’ Be behind him.”

When he finishes, everyone applauds as enthusiastically as possible on a Saturday morning. One elderly man with red eyes and wrinkly skin adds some words. “To be united is strong, but to be divided, you fall,” he says. He’s wearing a dress shirt like most of the older gentlemen at the table. The younger men have adapted American styles. One clean-cut man is wearing a beret. Another guy is sporting a flat-brimmed hat with skulls and crossbones. Chechaka-Muya’s son, a high school senior, is wearing sweatpants with racing stripes and a string-pack on his back.

Sally, looking very much like the professional lawyer she is with her glasses and stack of papers and folders, addresses the first item on the agenda.

“Ok, so the very first thing we’re going to do today—Everyone should have one paper that lists all of their important information,” she says, holding up a form she designed in the Word computer program. She passes out a few stacks.

“If you fill this out, then, when you have to fill out other forms and papers, you can just go to this one master paper and copy everything from there,” she says. The form she created is a simple form for people to fill in their family’s information—names, birthdays, social security numbers, I-94 numbers (the official U.S. document for refugees is the I-94), etc. Most families have a bag that they throw all of their important documents in. When they have to fill out a school paper, or fill out a form to get a

discounted rate on their gas or electric bills, or fill out a public housing form, it takes forever to sift through all the documents and find the information. It's a frequent hassle, especially since most people don't even know their birthdays and haven't bothered to memorize the ones given to them by U.S. officials. Sure, most of them were "born" on January 1, but they don't know what year. And most of them have so many kids that they have to look up 7 or 9 or 11 social security numbers and birthdays.

"You can keep this in a safe place," Sally says, pointing to the paper.

On the wheelchair ramp that leads into the meeting room, a Somali woman who is relatively new to the community clomps down the wheelchair ramp in loud heels. Late-comers have been trickling in throughout the meeting, but her entrance is more pronounced than most. When she sits down, Chechaka-Muya catches her up and repeats much of the same information in Maay-Maay, the other Somali Bantu language that this woman and some of the others at the table speak. For the most part, the families in Pittsburgh speak Kizigua. The families that moved to Omaha and other states speak Maay-Maay. When Chechaka-Muya finishes his summary about how important it is to be a united community and how important education is, the woman responds with her own concerns.

"How are you supposed to go to school and make money?" she asks. "How do you go to school and have a job? It is hard to do both," she says. Then she announces that she feels discriminated against because she doesn't have an American volunteer assigned to her family to help her out. Many families have an American who visits them on a weekly basis. Sally says they can discuss the issue after the meeting.

Then Tim, a staff member with the Pittsburgh Public Schools, says he's working on coordinating a citizenship class for Somali Bantu adults. They could meet twice a week at the middle school in Lawrenceville to improve their English and get ready for a U.S. citizenship test. To become a U.S. citizen, a person must pass a paper test in English, he explains.

At every meeting, Sally invites several people from the broader Pittsburgh community who can speak about services available to the Somali Bantu. College students from the local University of Pittsburgh come to talk about the tutoring program they run in the middle school that most Somali Bantu kids attend. They also tutor in the homes and, at the association meetings, the students often remind parents at the meetings to help them by "turning the TV off" when they visit. A woman named Mame-Yinka, a Nigerian immigrant and the executive director of Pittsburgh's AJAPO nonprofit organization that specifically serves immigrants from African and Afro-Caribbean islands, often attends the meetings and gives talks on how to find housing or how to get a green card, the first step toward U.S. citizenship. She always sprinkles her talks, which often veer into other subjects about how to survive American life, with sermons on self-sufficiency.

"Ask yourself: How can I help myself? Do not ask how the government can help me. Do not think that Catholic Charities or AJAPO can do everything for you," she began one Saturday when she was launching into a talk explaining the ways in which Somali Bantus can approach housing.

"I know 84 families, a total of 392 people, looking to *buy* houses," she says. "They can buy because they have been careful with their money. They have saved their money." She is a tall woman who wears Western clothes and speaks with a boom that

echoes in the library basement. Everyone is attentive to her words, a respect she earns not only because she speaks plain truths, but because she is a woman who has immigrated successfully from Nigeria. She understands multiple views.

“Some of these people did start with government housing programs,” she explains about her clients who are now buying homes. “The first program is Section 8. The government sends a check every month to help pay your rent. If you are looking to get Section 8 vouchers, you must apply. The door is open to everyone, but you must apply! It is a lottery. So if you are chosen, then fill out the papers. Act quickly because there are deadlines. If you are not chosen, then you must ask yourself: How do I help myself?” When she takes a breath, Chechaka-Muya translates her words into Kizigua.

“The number two kind of government housing is public housing,” she says. “You can only go to where the houses are built. It is good to not want to live in certain places. We are in America and here you can make your own choices. But don’t remain in Lawrenceville just because everyone is there. If you find a nice, safe place elsewhere, then you should go!”

“Of course, there’s renting,” she says. “And YOU are responsible to pay that rent. When you get paid, you do not use that money to buy hats. You do not use that money to travel to other cities. You pay your rent. And when the gas company says pay, you must pay! If you don’t pay, then the gas company doesn’t want to work with you anymore, and how will you get heat in the winter?”

“If you get \$20, you don’t say, ‘I’m going to Ohio.’ You save that money. Too many people say they can throw that away. Don’t think \$10 is not a lot of money. You

can save that every month, and little by little you will have a lot of money in your account. How can you help yourself?

“And women!” she yells, causing everyone to sit a little straighter, “Women are all buying gold. Gold! You women are spending thousands of dollars on gold. Men, I know you have to give your wives money, but spending \$800 on gold just because you are in America and you think you have money but—you—don’t. Well, women, women need to save their money as well!

At the head of the table, Chechaka-Muya translates some more while holding a stack of orange folders. He brought a bunch of colored folders to show attendees how they could organize their bills—gas bills in the orange folder, phone bills in the red folder, electricity bills in the green folder. When he finishes speaking, Mame-Yinka launches into her next subject.

“If you die,” she says heavily, “what are you leaving behind? In America, you can have life insurance. You can all come together as a group and get life insurance. Then, if you die, there is money for your children to live. You only have to put a little bit of money in—and,” she says, thinking of another issue, “if you are moving, you should always tell the community! Please do not just disappear!”

Chechaka-Muya translates and Sally takes the opportunity to move to the next item on the meeting agenda—school issues. This reminds Mame-Yinka of something else.

“Go learn English yourself,” she says while looking around the table at all of the elders who have mostly left that task up to their children. “You have people speak for you

and everybody knows your secrets. There are classes that are free. Why have you not learned English after four years?!”

At the meeting Tim attends to talk about the citizenship class, he says that he needs a guarantee of at least 10 people to run the class.

“Who will come?” Sally asks. Most hands go up, albeit tentatively.

The man in the beret suggests that people should ask their bosses if they can schedule their nights off on nights when the citizenship class is being held. “I think it’s legal to ask a boss for one or two days for school,” he says. Then he adds that it would be great if someone could start an adult computer class. Sally says that’s a great idea, though they would have to find a computer lab where someone could teach such a thing.

“We should have one place in Lawrenceville that is only for the Somali Bantu people,” a man wearing a lavender dress shirt suggests. He’s Chechaka-Muya’s brother and has often served as a translator for fellow Somali Bantus at the hospital or in court. However, he’s recently come under scrutiny, which may or may not be warranted, for spreading gossip that he’s learned from translating people’s lives.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Sally says about the suggestion to rent or buy a building just for the community’s youth, a modern version of the Sons of Italy clubs, or the Polish clubs that sustained large immigrant populations of yore. “I really think it’s a great idea. But to get money for that, you have to show that you are doing a lot of work. The people who will donate money will need to see you are trying very hard, and then they will help you.”

While she talks, Chechaka-Muya takes photos of the group at the meeting table with his digital camera. Then a man wearing a sling on his arm asks if people will get a certificate if they go to the adult citizenship class.

“You will get citizenship, which is much better than a certificate,” Sally says. “You will get all the same rights. All the same rights as me and the other Americans here. You will be able to vote. You will be able to do many things.”

Sally’s involvement with the Somali Bantu community began when she participated in a backpack drive at her Unitarian church for the first wave of Somali Bantu families who were resettled in Pittsburgh. It was held at her church, and hosted along with the Pittsburgh Refugee Center, which is run by refugee-resettlement expert Khadra Mohammed, a Somali herself. While the women stuffed donated backpacks with pencils and folders and other essential school supplies, Mame-Mohammed learned that Sally was a lawyer.

“You’re a lawyer? Why are you stuffing backpacks? There are so many other important things that we could use a lawyer for!” Mame-Mohammed exclaimed. Sally, who was enjoying the simple service of backpack-stuffing said there might be some ways she could get involved. She already does so much charity and pro bono work with the Pennsylvania Education Law Center. Sometimes she wants to volunteer in ways that aren’t legal-related.

Her involvement with the community association has been one of her important roles as a volunteer lawyer. She helped Chechaka-Muya to complete the paperwork that granted the association 501(c) nonprofit organization status. As a 501(c) organization, they can receive donations and apply for grants.

Across the country, other nonprofit Somali Bantu organizations have formed in Denver, Atlanta, San Antonio, Tucson, Omaha, Columbus, Vermont, and Maine. Men from Baltimore's association have attended Pittsburgh meetings to find out how they're handling things. Many of the associations have developed Web sites, too. The Tucson site even sells beaded necklaces crafted by Somali Bantu women.

The site for the Pittsburgh association includes photos of President Chechaka-Muya and a map of the Jubba River Valley. It has a page with English translations for 30 Kizigua words, including *jambo* (hello), *ikala* (sit), *viratu* (shoes), *mwanachiche* (girl), and *mwachirume* (boy). Chechaka-Muya wrote out the Kizigua words phonetically, based on the English alphabet. It also plays popular songs, which involve a lot of synthesizers, keyboards, and high-pitched melodies, the kinds of songs that the Somali Bantus listen to at weddings.

At the January wedding in the VFW Hall, the women's section is lively and loud. Occasionally, it's punctuated by the women's ululations. "AhheeeeEeeeeEeeeeEeeee!"

While Sally makes her rounds, Mame-Yusuf calls out to her. She asks her 15-year-old daughter to translate.

"My mother say, 'When are you coming to our house?'" Tukera says. "She want to talk about Yusuf. He want to marry Asha."

"Ok, yeah," Sally says, stalling. "I'm not sure when I'll be there, but you can call me."

Mame-Asha hustles onto the dance floor, one of the few mothers to do so. Her scarf is tied around her waist and a stud glints in her nose. Last month, she and I finally



returned to the Flying Monkey piercing salon on the South Side to get her nose pierced. A punk woman with pink streaks in her hair and spikes protruding from her eyebrows and chin worked with instruments on a silver tray, as though she were about to perform a dental exam.

“Where are you from?” she asked. Mame-Asha didn’t respond, then said “ah?” as though she was surprised the woman was talking to her.

“Where are you from?”

“Somalia,” she said.

“Oh, cool,” the woman said, then drew a small black dot on the side of Mame-Asha’s nose with permanent marker. Then she shoved a short straw up her nose and jabbed a needle through the outside. Mame-Asha closed her eyes, barely flinched.

Afterwards, she told me that the woman and other spike-faced people at Flying Monkey reminded her of the forest-people in Somalia and Kenya who helped her escape from violent militias and find firewood. They, too, pierced their faces in extreme ways.

At the wedding, while Mame-Asha shakes her way onto the dance floor, she carries \$1 bills in her hands. To the girls whose dancing she approves of, she gives a few dollars. She tucks the bills in their scarves if they have them wrapped around their waists, or she just hands them to the girls. Shake, shake, shake, shake. Shake, shake, shake.

Toward the end of the line, at an angle where Asha presumes that the camera and her father can’t see her, she dances across from a boy named Abdi. He’s been looking at her for a long time. She doesn’t look directly at him, but at her blue dirac swishing on the floor and then at the wall above him. When he inches a little closer from the boys’ line,

she has to concentrate not to break into a smile. She knows him from high school, but they've never talked before. Maybe she'll say "hi," in the hall on Monday.

## Chapter 9

### Jealous

At school, Asha began talking to Abdi a little bit. Just like a little “hi” and a smile in the hallway or in their ESL class. She tried to be inconspicuous, so the other Somali Bantu kids wouldn’t see, ’cause then they would talk to their mothers, who would then call her mother. But everyone knew. Everyone knew they were flirting. And they knew that Asha was probably getting married to Yusuf, not this other guy.

Then, she and Abdi got a MySpace page together. Well, it wasn’t exactly a page *together*, but he set it up for her. She wanted a MySpace page because everyone had one, or so it seemed. All the kids at school were talking about being on MySpace and

messaging their friends. Yeah, MySpace was cool. And finally she was up on the web, listed as a “Female, 17 years old, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States.” She never explained if the age 17 was deliberate or not. In her quest to always pretend she’s older than she is for nose piercing, etc., it would be characteristic of her behavior. On the other hand, it could’ve been an accident. Many of the MySpace pages of Somali Bantus across the country are errantly set at “Buenos Aires” for the location, or “100 years old,” for the age because the users are not always completely savvy at navigating the Web. Many of the Somali Bantus have set themselves up with the Hispanic version of MySpace.

Still, like most global citizens in the digital age, the Somali Bantus are creating formal and informal Web presences. There are the official Web sites put together by the community associations, like the Pittsburgh association has done. And there are the casual blogs and web forums where people chat and post jokes, like this:

*YOU KNOW UR SOMALI WHEN*

*You have 4 to 10 siblings in one House!*

*You crash weddings, and as soon as you get in there you ask ppl who’s the bride & groom*

*You hang curtains in front of doorways*

*Your mom & 10 of her friends/neighbours carpool together to go visit a sick person in the hospital....Then get mad at the hospital staff when told there can only be 2 visitors at a time in the room.*

*Your whole family birth date is january, 1*

*Your mom says "u can memorize music, but u cant memorize Qur'an"*

*You buy a computer and ur parents ask for BBC somali radio 24/7*

*Your a Somali dude and your clothes dangle around your waist*

*You have a printer, but it doesn't WORK*

*Your mom wears a dirac to the supermarket*

*You have the same drapes as at least 5 other somalians*

Once Asha learned how to log in to her MySpace account, she began checking her MySpace page every day at the school computer lab or on Chechaka-Asha's computer in the tent-room. Unknown men began "friending" her and sending her messages saying she looked pretty in her profile pic. She thought so, too—it was a photo of her in her favorite royal blue dress, an image that I snapped of her when she was in Buffalo. She was glad that all of those men liked it. It was flattering. And so she responded and wrote, "thank u." Soon, she says, she had like 50 boys on her MySpace friend list and, like, three girls.

Most of the men were Africans with Muslim names, and many of them were other Somali Bantu immigrants, so she felt pretty safe. She started exchanging phone numbers with them. When Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha were out grocery shopping or visiting family in Lawrenceville, and she was bored babysitting her siblings, she began calling some of these boys she met online. Sometimes she talked to them while she was cooking or cleaning. They told her about what it was like at their schools, which she thought was pretty cool.

She told some boys, especially Somali Bantus whose families might know hers, that she didn't want to call them because her number or his number might show up on the caller IDs of their home phones. Someone might snitch to her mother. Then, one guy told her that if she pushed \*67, no one could see the number. So she started calling some Somali Bantu boys with her privacy trick.

Some of the boys were nice, she said, but some were dirty. One guy in California sent dirty friends to her MySpace page. And she ripped up the number of a guy with an 801 area code. She didn't know where that place was, but she didn't want to talk to anybody from 801 again. (Area code 801 is for Salt Lake City, Utah.) Another boy called her "baby."

"I said, 'I'm not your baby,'" she recalled later. "I just want to be friends." He promised to only be friends with her, but he kept slipping and calling her "baby." So Asha had to explain the rules of their conversation: "I said, 'You are not being friends. You call me and say: Hi, how are you? How is your family? How is school? You do not call me and say, 'baby.''"

When MySpace boys asked her if she had a boyfriend, Asha always said, "no." Yeah, she talked to a boy at school and he was kind of her boyfriend, but they didn't kiss or do any of those things that American kids do. And she wasn't going to marry him anyway.

Abdi, however, considered Asha his girlfriend and he didn't like all of these boys who were posting compliments on her MySpace wall. Didn't she like him? And if she did like him, wouldn't she post pictures of him on her page and announce to the world that he was her guy? Asha felt bad about all those boys and didn't know what to tell Abdi.

"I don't have any pictures of you, so that's why I didn't put any up," she explained. "Maybe you can put some on there."

So Abdi uploaded a photo of himself standing on a grassy lawn wearing jeans, a giant cowboy medallion on his belt, and a white T-shirt. Then he "wallpapered" it on Asha's page. Anyone who visited her page would see that photo of him plastered in the

background. The wallet-size photo repeated at least a 100 times so users would see it when they scrolled up or down or sideways.

Then Abdi made a cute little collage for Asha's profile pic. On top of a photo of the St. Louis Archway, he added a small photo of himself on the lawn and a small photo of her in the blue dress. On the bottom, he wrote a caption: "Reppin Da Love!"

After Abdi made changes to Asha's page, she didn't receive many comments from other men anymore. When she called up one guy, he said he didn't want to talk to her again. He explained that her boyfriend found his number on her page, then called and threatened to fight him.

"What are you talking about? I don't have a boyfriend," Asha lied. The guy hung up.

In the midst of Asha's MySpace antics, Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha were talking with Mame-Yusuf, Chechaka-Yusuf, and Yusuf about the marriage proposal. Mame-Yusuf wanted them to get married this summer, but since Asha wouldn't be 16 until December, she relented and said they could get married the following summer, after Asha finished her sophomore year of high school.

"Yusuf needs a wife," she kept insisting. Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha were still unsure. Mame-Asha knew that Asha didn't want to get married yet, and she wasn't too keen on Yusuf. She urged Chechaka-Asha to say no.

Finally, he said no.

Word got around fast that had turned down the marriage proposal. Yusuf was furious and Ahmed was angry, too. Their family had been slighted.

On an April evening not long after Chechaka-Asha said “no,” he’s hanging out in the tent room. He hasn’t been home on a weekday night in months because he had been working the evening shift as a janitor at an office building on the North Shore. He looks fatter; his gut is protruding more. Turns out he’s at home because he lost his job. He shrugs, says there wasn’t enough work for everybody. He wasn’t working enough hours.

We talk about if it’s possible for him to get a job at a farm, just outside the city, to perform the type of work he knows. Mame-Asha perks up at this. Then Chechaka-Asha hands me a pile of junk mail and other papers. One is a flyer about covex, an illness that often affects babies.

“The doctor say Ebra have this,” Chechaka-Asha says. The paper explains that covex is a disease of the mouth that is usually caused by exposure to feces. After I read the flyer, we talk about hygiene and I emphasize that the person who is changing his diaper (usually Zeynab) should be more careful with the contents and make sure to wash her hands afterward.

Chechaka-Asha says it’s not so bad to have a break from work. He says that next week he’ll go to Omaha to visit his daughter Mame-Yusuf and other family. Then Chechaka-Asha heads upstairs, plodding in his blue and red wrap skirt and sandals. When he’s out of hearing range, Mame-Asha says:

“Dig? Me first, Miss Cara, me first.”

“She say she wants to be the first person to get the job,” Asha explains. Then the phone rings and she answers. She frowns and leaves the tent-room for the back bedroom. She speaks in harsh Kizigua words on the way.



Later that evening, I pound five times on Mame-Yusuf's blue door on Liberty Avenue, my usual number. *Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum*. Sometimes it takes a minute for one of the young kids to answer the door. I wait for longer than a minute. *Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum*. Silence. I don't hear anyone inside. Then I look at the windows and notice that the pink sheets are gone and there aren't any lights on. The family is ... gone.

I wonder if they've lit on out to Kentucky or another state where their relatives are living. The public housing system in Pittsburgh has been problematic and Mame-Yusuf has said that things are better in Kentucky. When her family applied for public housing, the agency balked at number of nine kids. (Mame-Yusuf's eldest son is married with three children of his own and has his own row house.) The only homes large enough for the size of a family were refurbished Victorian mansions in the Garfield or Homewood neighborhoods, houses that cost a fortune to heat in the winter. There was a waiting list.

When the family was offered one of those giant homes, they turned it down because they didn't like the Garfield neighborhood. They'd heard of a murder there and they thought it was too dangerous. So the agency bumped the family's request to the bottom of the list. According to their policy, if a family doesn't accept a home that is offered to them, they must return to the back of the line.

So, they stayed in their Lawrenceville row house where they were paying \$600 per month, a joint effort between their father (who was also trying to support his second wife and seven children), Yusuf (who could move out at anytime if he ever gets a wife), and Ahmed (who is still in high school and working at a laundry company on weekends). Public housing would only cost \$150 or \$200. Truth is, they probably should've moved.

Unfortunately, at their income level, they don't have much choice in regards to the quality of neighborhoods. And the row house they were in now probably wasn't much safer anyway.

Two years before, the director of the Pittsburgh Refugee Agency, Mame-Mohammed, met with the local housing authority to see if a public housing community specifically for Somali Bantu families could be set up. Catholic Charities wasn't able to do it, and the families were struggling to pay their market-price rents in Lawrenceville. The housing authority figured that they had space on the North Side of Pittsburgh, fairly close to the Manchester Block. It seemed like an ideal situation. The Somali Bantus, the refugee center, and housing authority were all excited about it.

Then the Somalis began saying there was too much crime over there. It was a bad neighborhood and they didn't want to move. Mame-Mohammed blamed the change in opinion on volunteers from her center—white middle-aged moms who *gasped!* when the families told them they were moving to the “North Side.” Although that side of the city has rough spots, it's not as awful as those volunteers may have thought. Fear about the place had been solidified in the name. In fact, negative public opinion about the North Side was so bad in Pittsburgh in recent years, that businesses near the baseball and football stadiums that bordered the Allegheny River coined the more leisure-sounding “North Shore.”

The whole public housing deal fell through.

Tonight, as I stand on the stoop that was Mame-Yusuf's house just last week, I recall that the family said they were moving around April 1. A couple of months ago, I

helped Ahmed look up apartment listings because they wanted to move down the hill into central Lawrenceville. They didn't like their landlord because he'd never helped them with the plumbing or the rat infestation.

I call Mame-Yusuf's house phone. It rings and rings and rings, since the number is probably still connected to the house I'm standing in front of. I call Ahmed's cell phone. The number is defunct. I call Yusuf's cell phone. After several rings he answers.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's Cara."

"Who?"

"It's Miss Cara."

"Oh, *Miss* Cara. How are you?"

"Good. Did you move?"

"Ya."

Pause. I expect a reply about where or when they moved. But Yusuf says nothing.

"Where do you live now?"

"Blackberry Way," he says, rolling the r's in blackberry.

"What?"

"Blackberry Way."

"Oh, where is that? How do I get there from Butler Street?"

"I don't know, I get Ahmed." I hear clomping static and distant yells, as though I was watching a home video and the camera had just been dropped.

"Hello."

"Hi Ahmed, how are you?"

“Good, Miss Cara.”

“How do I get to your new house?”

“Go to forty-nine street.

“Fourth-ninth street?”

“Ya.”

“Then what?”

“Then right on Blackberry Way.”

“Ok, what number is the house?”

“Mmm, I don’t know. By the house there are many mattresses.”

“There are mattresses outside?”

“Ya, they are by the house.”

“Ok. See you soon.”

Ten minutes later, I park on Blackberry Way, a small alley not too far from the river. I see several box springs on the sidewalk and I knock on a door, hoping it’s the correct one.

The door bursts open.

“Hi,” Yusuf says. I am standing in the small, living room. There’s no foyer or hallway in this house. There’s no pause to ease into the home. I’m simply—there. It is bright blue. Yusuf disappears upstairs and doesn’t say anything about his rejected marriage proposal.

“Hi, Miss Cara,” Mame-Yusuf says, walking into the blue room. “House.”

“Yes, a new house, do you like it?”

“Four bedroom,” she says, proudly.

“Oh, good.” Then Mame-Yusuf motions for me to tour the place. The kitchen is as large as the living room. Up the narrow stairs there are two bedrooms. Up another flight there are two more.

“No light,” Mame-Yusuf says about the bedrooms, when I meet her downstairs again. “Hawa crying,” she says, referring to her 2-year-old daughter. There aren’t any built-in lights or electrical switches.

Ahmed is on the couch, shouting into his cell phone in Kizigua and English. His eyes are bugged out and he appears angry, an emotion I don’t see from him very often.

“No one likes you. You can’t get a husband!” he yells. Then he continues ranting in Kizigua. I don’t know who he’s talking to, but I suspect it’s Asha.

“Who was that?” I ask after Ahmed snaps his phone shut.

“Some girl at school,” he says, scoffing. He doesn’t offer any more information.

“Miss Cara, can we go to house?” Dadeeri asks. He’s 13, the youngest son in the family. “We forget some things there.”

“The one on Liberty Avenue?” I ask.

“Ya, we need to get some things,” Ahmed says.

“Yeah, sure, we can grab a load.” Ahmed and Dadeeri find their shoes and we head out to my car.

“Wait, Miss Cara. Flashlight,” Dadeeri says and runs back into the house. I don’t understand why he needs a flashlight, but I wait and then we drive the two miles up to Liberty Avenue. Inside, I realize there aren’t any lights in the old house, either. Dadeeri shines the flashlight down the hallway and we go inside. All sorts of things are still strewn on the floor. Ahmed finds a garbage bag and begins filling it with tomatoes and

milk from the refrigerator. He tosses in knives and pots. There's still one pot on the stove with some old *ugali* porridge in it and there's a weird mold growing in a silverware drawer.

"Are you going to come back and clean this apartment up?" I ask, looking at the crumby floors and strewn batteries and shoes and ripped books and yarn. The place smells faintly of urine.

"Ya, tomorrow my mother is going to come here," he says.

Upstairs, Dadeeri uses his flashlight to find a stack of CDs and shoes and a backpack. We load it all into my trunk. Then we load dumbbells and computer cords and a carpet and the garbage bag with pots and vegetable oil. When we drive back down into central Lawrenceville, Dadeeri sits in the backseat and balances a stereo speaker that's teetering on the piles of house-stuff.

At Blackberry Way, the sisters help to unload the goods, including the toy bag in my trunk. "Sit, sit," Mame-Yusuf says, while the girls drag the stuff into the kitchen and upstairs. I sit on the couch next to her. Ahmed bangs down on the other couch and begins telling his mother an intense story. By his anger, I guess that he's recounting his cell phone conversation. When Ahmed slips Asha's name into the conversation, I am certain that she was the girl on the other end of the phone.

Throughout the rant, Mame-Yusuf repeats a Kizigua word over and over again, so that it sounds like a refrain.

"Weeve-oh. Weeve-oh. Weeve-oh." I sit on the couch in silence, making a mental note to ask about the definition of weeve-oh.

After Ahmed and Mame-Yusuf finish their conversation, Mame-Yusuf calls to one of her daughters. Mazina enters with folds of fabric. It's for the new tent-room, the tent-room in this house. The walls must be covered up.

Ahmed stands on a dining chair and sticks the fabric into the wall with thumbtacks. Mame-Yusuf stands on the ground and holds the material, occasionally pointing her finger and providing guidance. These curtains have big red flowers and gold tassels, a change from the hot pink sheets that have always defined her tent-room.

"Are these new sheets?" I ask. Ahmed confers.

"Ya, she buy in Columbus," he says, referring to Ohio's capital. Then I return to helping one of the daughters read a Carebears book. Slowly, Mame-Yusuf and Ahmed etch around the room, hanging the drapery, but it only makes it halfway. Mame-Yusuf shakes her head.

"She say she thought she buy enough to cover the whole house," Ahmed translates.

"Oh, oops," I say. Ahmed and Mame-Yusuf plop on to the couches with disappointment.

"So, what does 'weeve-oh' mean?" I ask. "Your mother kept saying it when you were talking earlier."

"Oh," Ahmed says, twitching the corners of his lips. "Kind of like jealous."

"Jealous," I say. "Asha is jealous?"

"Ya," he says flatly.

"What's the problem?" I ask Ahmed about his argument with Asha.

“No problem,” he says, toning things down with a gentle wave of his hand. “We just fight a little bit.”

At school, none of Asha’s Somali Bantu girlfriends would talk to her. Yusuf’s sister, Tukera, avoided eye contact. Both men and women made snarky comments about her being a slut. She’d been flirting with Abdi. And they’d seen her MySpace page. Why was she friends with so many boys? She must be having sex with everybody. Variations of “fuck” were repeated in hot exchanges and Sally was called to the high school to monitor the dispute. Chechaka-Asha was called and was told his daughter was in frequent fights with other students. They recommended that he monitor what Asha was doing on her MySpace page.

Chechaka-Asha has a MySpace page, too. He got on because siblings and cousins in other states were putting up pages. His profile pic is a photo of him in the tent-room. He’s wearing sunglasses and standing near the mantle with the drinking glasses and plastic flowers. The tops of Zeynab’s and Ebra’s heads are just visible in the background. He hasn’t been very active with it, and since he left the privacy options open, porn spammers have been posting advertisements and videos of naked girls on his wall.

One day, Asha got on the computer in the tent-room and found her father’s page open.

“Mame,” she called to her mother, and then explained that there were all kinds of girls writing things on his Web page. Mame-Asha got up and ventured near the computer, which she rarely does. She squinted at the photos and asked more questions about what this site was, and who were these White girls, anyway?



When Chechaka-Asha returned home, Mame-Asha asked him about the girlfriends he was talking to on the computer. He said they weren't anyone important, just crazy people who pop onto the pages. Then, he asked: "How did you get on my page and read my messages, anyway?" He knew Mame-Asha can't read English or use the computer. She says it doesn't matter who told her, but he calls Asha anyway. He asks his daughter what she was doing getting on his site and talking carelessly to her mother.

"It wasn't me, I didn't read anything," she shrugged.

"You," he said, "are not allowed on the computer anymore."

Asha protested that she needed to go on the computer for homework but he said he didn't care. She usually wasted time on there anyway. And she needed to get in shape to find a husband. How is he supposed to find her a good husband if she's on a Web site, whoring herself out?

## Chapter 10

### Black Magic

In the bathroom of a wooden house on the West Side of Buffalo, Asha and her cousin Arbai lean in toward a mirror and brush their fingers along their noses. They turn their heads slightly from side-to-side, figuring out exactly where the jewelry would look best in their noses. Arbai has a narrow, Arabic-angle to her eyes, and she looks intently at her nose. On the sink-counter at their waists, there's a set of stud earrings—flowers with metal petals and pink gems in the center. The girls will each wear one.

Although the cousins are a year apart in age, Asha has a womanly figure while Arbai is stick-thin and looks like she hasn't yet reached puberty. Asha is wearing flip-flops on her wide feet. Arbai wears chunky heels. They both have sparkly scarves wrapped around their shoulders, dressed up as though they're going to a wedding.

The bathroom is white and plain. There's a faint scent of urine from where people missed the toilet. In the bathtub behind them there's a bucket and some torn up rags. Many Somali Bantus use the bucket to give themselves a sponge bath when they don't want to turn the full shower on. It's especially important if they're observing Mecca several times a day. Before praying, worshippers are supposed to bathe and put on fresh clothes. Taking a full shower five times a day would be too much.

Asha picks up a sewing needle from the sink counter and delicately holds it in her thick fingers. She tells Arbai that they really need to "punch it," to make sure it goes all the way through their noses. She hopes that her cousin doesn't go crazy when she sees the blood.

Asha is in Buffalo for a two-week stay. It's summer vacation, which has been a welcome break from the harassment she was enduring at school for being a flirt and turning down Yusuf's proposal. She's visiting with her Aunt Madina not only to reconnect with the family she met last Ramadan, but to help out, too. Aunt Madina's infant daughter is in the hospital with a gastrointestinal defect that required surgery. And Arbai, the eldest daughter who is supposed to cook and clean and care for her siblings, was in a mental hospital recently. So Asha is here to help out with some of the cooking.

Several days ago, the girls visited their grandmother at her house in Buffalo. Genealogically-speaking, the woman is not their grandmother, but a great aunt. Still, they

call her grandmother. They love her and were glad to see her. But it was a mistake to go. Trouble was waiting for them.

At their grandmother's house, a place full of relatives, someone finds a snake. A big, big snake. Everyone runs, shrieks, yells. Asha tears across the yard. When she turns to see where the snake is, she sees it's only following Arbai. Wherever Arbai goes, the snake goes. Everybody else sees it, too. The girl is cursed. Someone is making that snake follow Arbai, Asha thinks. She wishes for a powder or a bracelet or something to protect herself, something to keep this evil away. Luckily, the snake slithers away from Arbai without biting her. Unfortunately, it still managed to poison her mind.

Later, the spell that the snake put on eventually takes hold of Arbai. It's night and everyone is at home at Aunt Madina's, relaxing together. Arbai goes to her room for something when—

“AHhhhhheeeeeeeeeee!!!!”

Asha and Aunt Madina rush into the room. Arbai is standing on her bed, covered in embroidered sheets, and she's stripping her dress off.

“AHhhhhheeeeeeeeeee!!!!” she continues yelling. Asha and Aunt Madina call out to Arbai but she doesn't hear them. When she looks at them, she doesn't see them. Now she is naked and screaming and thrashing her arms everywhere. The snake has possessed her. When the little siblings peek in the doorway, Aunt Madina harshly yells at them to go away.

“Take me Allah!! Make me die!!” Arbai screams in Kizigua. “Allah, make me die!! I want to die!!”

Asha is so scared. Aunt Mazina is, too. Aunt Mazina says this happened before. This is what happened before she called the police the first time, and they took Arbai away to where crazy people go. And there were Americans there, American men working in the hospital. Arbai said they touched her; they raped her. Aunt Mazina was horrified, but didn't know if it was true, or just in her daughter's mind. Someone was surely raping her mind.

A man enters the bedroom. It's Arbai's uncle, her father's brother. He chants words that Asha doesn't know, but she supposes it's a counter spell. Arbai begins to calm, to relax. She slowly curls down onto the bed and then falls asleep. Aunt Madina and Asha cover her naked body with scarves and sheets. Black magic is happening. Asha is certain. Her people are always putting spells on each other, but recently it seems like a lot has been happening. Maybe she's just now noticing it.

"Her husband, he knows how to do bad stuff," Asha tells me one evening while we're driving across Pittsburgh on an errand.

"What do you mean bad stuff?" I ask. I'd inquired after the well-being of her eldest sister, Halima, who is married with two children and living in Omaha.

"Like black magic, I don't know how you call it. We call it *mobolooko*. But our people, they do that. And my sister's husband, he put some black stuff on the seat in the bathroom, you know, where you pee," she says, rubbing her fingers as though she's sprinkling something on my dashboard. "We call it *veenba*. But he put this black stuff on and she didn't know it was there. And so she sit, you know, she have to. And she gets

stuck. She can't move. My sister was crying and crying. People were coming to the house and asking for her, and her husband say, 'She is not here. She went to a neighbor's.'

"So that is why my mother won't talk to him if he calls. She won't say 'hi,' she won't say nothing. If I answer the phone, she tell me to say she's not there. Sometimes, he calls at 10 and I say, 'She is sleeping.' He call at 4 and I say, 'She is sleeping.' All the times he calls, I say, 'She is sleeping.' And he asks me: 'When does she sleep?' And I say: 'She sleep whenever she wants. What do you want?'"

While she recounts this story, her tone is strong and bullish. And I wonder if she's exaggerating just a bit. I can't imagine that a man would be that insistent on talking to his mother-in-law. She continues her story.

"My mother say she give him one chance, but if he does more black magic, she will bring Halima and the babies back to Pittsburgh. They will live here."

"So, why did he do black magic on her?" I ask.

"He is jealous. My sister's uncles, they live out there, you know," she says, even though I didn't know that she has uncles in Omaha. "And sometimes they go visit and she cook for them. And he gets mad when he comes home and sees her with them. He is jealous. And my mother, my mother she say to him: 'How could she do anything with them? They are her uncles!' He is jealous."

She pauses a moment and looks out the window as we cross a bridge. It's dark and downtown glows in the distance.

"Yeah, and his mother, when she found out he was doing that bad stuff, she was so mad. She yell at him. And now she moved to their house. Because she knows how to

do that black magic and he knows that if he tries to do anything to my sister, his mother will do something bad back to him. So he cannot do anything.”

“So his mother moved in to prevent him from doing black magic on your sister,” I confirm.

“Y-e-a-h.”

“People in Pittsburgh, they know how to do black magic,” she continues, speaking in her bold gossip voice.

“Yeah, when I’m downtown, I shake hands with Fato’s father. And he put a spell on me. I look down at my hand and it grow big like this,” she says, while stacking her hands. She raises her top hand to the ceiling of my car, indicating that the other hand grew thick and large like a blown-up latex glove. Supposedly he induced this spell because he needed Asha to marry Yusuf so his daughter could marry someone else. But now she might have to marry him.

“Yeah, and I was not having my period, but that day it come,” she says about the spell. “And it hurt a lot. There was long stuff that I had to keep pulling out with my hands. And I was crying. At school I was in the bathroom and I keep pulling and pulling. I don’t know what you call it, but it was like meat. Yeah, it was like meat. And my teacher ...”

Asha continues talking about getting a pass for the bathroom, but I barely pay attention because I’m so horrified by the meat-pulling details. Surely they cannot be real. What is the truthful story? Maybe she needs to see a gynecologist. Did she imagine that her hand was getting bigger?

“... so I tell my teacher I was sick and she didn’t believe me. She give me detention, but my mother don’t care. She know what really happened, but doesn’t want to tell the people at school, you know.”

After this statement, I wonder if the whole story was concocted so she didn’t get in trouble with her mother for having detention.

“We don’t know how to do black magic because we go to Kakuma,” she claims, referring to the last refugee camp her family was transferred to before coming to the United States. “On the day we leave Dadaab, the people come and teach black magic. So we don’t know how to do it. But the other people in Pittsburgh do. Don’t tell any of them that I told you.”

“There are black things that you can buy and wear to keep the black magic off of you,” she continues. “Like a bracelet, yeah, a bracelet. I tell my mother I need to get one.”

“Where do you get them?” I ask.

“Erie,” she says. I assume this means that someone in the Somali Bantu community in Erie, Pa., sells these spell-blocking bracelets. “They are \$85. I tell my mother, I don’t care if it’s \$100 or \$1,000, she need to buy it for me. I need to get one to keep spells off me. People are trying to put spells on me to make me pregnant.”

That night when we return to her house, I ask about her period issues.

“So are you OK? Is everything with your period OK? Do you want to go to a doctor?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, it’s fine,” she says nonchalantly in her normal voice, surprised at my concern. She was telling a story. What am I worried about?



When the Somali Bantus converted to Islam many years ago, many of them continued to practice their beliefs of honoring ancestors and appeasing spirits that caused evil things like mental illness to take root in people. They continued to carefully watch and listen to what was said in their dreams. Today, some of their religious practices are a mix of both orthodox Islam and the Bantu beliefs.

Asha says that when she doesn't read the Qu'ran frequently enough, a man in a white suit comes to her in the night. Sometimes she wakes up and tells the man to leave her alone.

"Who are you yelling at?" Mame-Asha shouted one night over her daughter's screams. Asha told her about the man.

"You're crazy," her mother said. "There's no man here."

The black magic is simply a way to explain unknown phenomenon, to tell stories that illuminate what's happening in the world. Unfortunately, it seems that for teen girls like Asha, black magic has become an excuse and an evil when girls don't keep their chastity. Women attempt to put spells on unmarried women to make them pregnant, a double-entendre that implicates the woman creating the spell (or "spelly" as they sometimes call them) and the one who is too weak to succumb to it. These kinds of stories leave men free from responsibility. Oh, he was just acting under a spell, he could say. The girls' aunt wanted to punish her family for a wrong. I had to do it when the spirit was inside me. She got pregnant? It wasn't me. It's her fault her family did something wrong.

During Asha's vacation in Buffalo, Arbai told her a story about how she had sex with a boy.

She was only kissing him a little bit when she felt the spell coming on. First, the orange curtains dimmed to a generic gray and the bedroom became enveloped in darkness. Then her eyes and her mind felt the lightness of dizziness. Someone, somewhere was cursing her, putting this spell on her—maybe her aunt. Her body felt heavy, like she'd been tied to a tree-stump and dumped in a river. She slumped backwards onto a mattress. And the boy got on top of her.

She was paralyzed. Unmoving. With her legs open. In the dark room, the boy pressed on top of her and did something bad. Down there. She could not get up or fight him off. He was a family friend. Her boyfriend. And he was doing this to her because someone put a spelly on her to get her pregnant. Her father was in a feud with his sister, and recently she said something bad would happen to his family. That bad thing was happening now. Her aunt was trying to make her pregnant.

When Asha heard this story, she completely understood. Asha, too, suspected that women in Pittsburgh were trying to make her pregnant—like Yusuf's mother. When Arbai told her the story of the men raping her cousin in the mental hospital, Asha told her never to go back there. But Arbai said it would be good to go back. She was surprised they Asha had that impression. After all, she was only telling a story. The people at the hospital gave her medicines and it was a good place. They took care of her and made her

mind feel better, most of the time. It seems that the trick with black magic is figuring out which stories to believe.

In the bathroom, Asha and Arbai count off and finally stab the needles through their noses. Asha feels a sting and looks at herself in the mirror with the needle stuck into her nose. She feels something wet and red blood begins to leak out of her nostril. She takes the needle out, rinses her nose in the sink, and then pushes the earring stud into the hole. The hole isn't big enough and she has to push it in. It hurts, really bad.

Arbai is crying and crying. The needle has only gone halfway through her nose. Asha holds her and pushes it further as Arbai bends her knees and crumples away. Luckily, the needle doesn't jab into anything.

"Get up, get up," Asha demands as she grabs her cousin's wrist and pulls her up. Together, they wash her nose. Then Asha tells Arbai to lie down on the bathroom tile. She sits on her cousin's chest like a wrestler and pushes the earring stud into her nose. Arbai cries and cries and cries.

"Owww," Asha, giggles when Arbai has calmed down. "That hurt."

"Look, we're beautiful," she adds as the girls look at their new nose piercings in the mirror. They each have a crust of blood and a pretty little flower.

## Chapter 11

### Vegas, Baby

This same summer, the 2008 Summer of Asha Piercing her Own Nose, Mame-Asha's brother journeys from Las Vegas to Pittsburgh in search of his first wife. Chechaka-Omari's wife had traveled to Pittsburgh in the spring for a visit with their grown daughter and never returned. Rumor was she didn't like her husband much and had decided she'd rather live with her daughter and care for her grandchildren. He already had another wife in Vegas who could care for him anyway.

Polygamy has created interesting cross-state exchanges in the Somali Bantu community. Although Chechaka-Asha only has one wife—Mame-Asha—many men have multiple wives, though legally they have one wife and several ex-wives. In many Muslim countries, polygamy is a standard family structure and is legally protected. The Qur'an permits polygamy.

During Ramadan fasting, the Qur'an explicitly states that in addition to food and drink, believers should abstain from sexual relations during daylight hours. Although Jewish Talmuds and Christian scriptures say that sex is forbidden during any period of fasting, Mohammad's Qur'an allows it. And although all religions are fraught with issues of sexual relations, the differences in how it's practiced in Islamic culture has clashed dramatically with Judaism and Christianity. One prediction of Muslim heaven is that it's filled with some 70 virgins.

In Pittsburgh, Mame-Yusuf's husband Chechaka-Yusuf is the grandest father and polygamist, having produced 20 children with three wives.

Ahmed wants some help with his homework. I've popped into Mame-Yusuf's tent-room at sunset on a Wednesday evening in May. A fan is stirring the warm scents of sweat and cooking oil while the sisters shuffle alphabet cards across the carpet. Mame-Yusuf is embroidering a bed sheet with yarn and Yusuf is watching British soccer reruns and downloading music videos.

In the corner of a couch, Ahmed pulls a worksheet from his backpack and sets it on a coffee table. He does a better job than his sisters of keeping his papers clean and unwrinkled, but there are already some crinkles on this one. It's a fill-in-the-blank assignment about HIV and AIDS.

The homework papers that Mame-Yusuf's children uncrumple daily from their half-dozen backpacks are like tape measures for calculating distances between cultural norms. Homework didn't seem like a cultural indicator when I was a kid, but that's because I was part of the American mainstream middle class. What I learned at home and in school was generally the same. The lessons were subtle and simple: I had birthday parties with cakes and balloons and so did the characters in the stories I read for school. It never occurred to me that some people didn't celebrate birthdays or didn't know what day they were born.

The idea that everyone celebrates the anniversary of their birthday is just one cultural assumption that I've noticed while guiding Mame-Yusuf's children through their homework each week. The books and worksheets also assume that kids love puppies, that families have grassy backyards, and that families go on trips called vacations. But here in the Royal Tent Room, no one has ever had a birthday party, dogs are revered as much as rats, the backyard is concrete, and no one could think of a reason to, say, travel to the beach as a whole family. Why would they all leave, unless they were moving to a new house?

Of course, average American kids lives' also deviate from the storybooks, but not as dramatically as the lives of Mame-Yusuf's children. The difference between what they learn at home and in school is often confusing. Learning whether to write *he*, *she*, or *it* can be hard enough for a first-grader, but it's even more difficult when you don't already know the genders of names like Bob and Sally, or understand culturally-inflected social indicators like pink as a color for girls.

Tonight, Ahmed reads aloud the directions for the fill-in-the-blank worksheet from his high school health class. While I half-listen, I praise kindergartener Asinina for another colorful drawing of flowers (*Nice! Good job!*) and accept an orange pop from Tukera. The phone rings and Dadeeri answers it, then hands it to his mom. While Mame-Yusuf chatters loudly in Kizigua, 4-year-old Hawa holds up an alphabet card for the letter “S,” and shouts “Miss Cara!” to get me to acknowledge her. I nod in her direction as Ahmed asks for help in listing the three ways HIV can be transmitted.

“Well how do you get it?” I ask, trying to get Ahmed to remember what his teacher said about HIV in class.

“Maybe with a needle,” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “If bad blood gets on a needle you could get sick.” He writes, “needle,” on the first line. I decide to give away the pregnancy answer to bide a little time.

“If a woman is pregnant, if she has a baby inside,” I say as I point to my belly, “She can give it to her baby.” While talking about mother-to-baby transmission, I try to figure out the most tactful way to discuss the most obvious answer for how HIV is spread—sex. Since there are a half-dozen young children in the Royal Tent Room, I don’t want to say something they’ll repeat. Most of them are focused on their coloring or homework, but still. I take a sip of my orange pop. What if Ahmed doesn’t know English words for sex? What if I have to go into an uncomfortable explanation about relations between men and women? I’m so worried about what I’m going to say that I’m surprised when Ahmed points his pencil at a piece of scrap paper.

“Miss Cara, what about this?” he asks quietly. On the paper, he’s written one word: *Sperm*.

“Yes, that works,” I say, almost laughing. I needn’t have worried. I guess he’s already finished the sex ed. unit at school and he didn’t want to say inappropriate words in front of his sisters either. While he continues working on his homework, I think about the AIDS epidemic in Africa, a problem announced by Western countries and their charities, but denied by many of the African governments. I think about the destructive rumors that if a man has sex with a virgin he will be cured—and the resulting stories of the rapes of young girls. I wonder what Ahmed knows or thinks about the disease. I’m fairly certain that he and the other Somali Bantus are healthy since refugees aren’t allowed to immigrate to the United States if they’ve tested positive for HIV.

“Many people in Africa have AIDS” I say.

“Ya,” says Ahmed.

“Did you know anyone with it?” I ask.

“No,” he says in a high-pitched tone, indicating that I should’ve already known the answer.

During one of my visits several months later, Ahmed and Yusuf will laugh convulsively about a music video playing on their computer. The Tanzanian song is about children whose parents have died of Aid-ees, as Yusuf pronounces it, and the video shows footage of orphaned kids. I will ask several times what’s so funny, but they won’t have any reasons other than the fact that the children’s parents had the incurable disease. The only explanation for their laughter that I will be able to infer is that they’re reacting to gut humor, the sort that masks fears and unfortunate realities.



But at this homework session when we first talk about AIDS, we're not laughing. Ahmed's father Chechaka-Yusuf has just arrived wearing his employee nametag for the Crowne Plaza hotel outside Pittsburgh, where he works as a janitor. After shaking my hand, he sits on another couch. Tukera disappears into the kitchen to cook for him and the youngest sisters hover nearby, waiting for an offering of candy. Mame-Yusuf pulls out a small photo album and hands it to Hussein. Yusuf gets up from the computer and sits next to his father on the couch to look at the photos.

Ahmed is almost done with his worksheet. Now he needs to list ways to prevent getting HIV. There's a box of vocabulary words, one of which is "monogamy." Ahmed asks me for a definition.

"It means you only have one wife," I say.

At the same time, Chechaka-Yusuf passes the photo album to me.

"Who is this?" I ask about the picture of a young man with slacks, button-down shirt, and sunglasses.

"My brother," Ahmed says.

"Chechaka-Yusuf's son," Yusuf says, though it's his brother, too.

"I didn't know you had another brother," I say. I know that Chechaka-Yusuf has another wife with seven children who also live in Pittsburgh, but the two wives and children rarely interact. I didn't know that Chechaka-Yusuf had more children. How many does he have?

"What is his name?" I ask. The man in the photo does resemble Ahmed and Yusuf with his full cheeks and broad-shouldered build.

"Rhaman. He get married in Arizona," Yusuf says, rolling the "r" in Arizona.

“Why does he live in Arizona?” I ask.

“The government, they put him there,” Ahmed says, referring to how the U.S. State Department resettled the Somali Bantu in 50 cities across the country.

“Same father, different mother,” Yusuf says, explaining their connection.

“Oh, is his mother in Arizona?” I ask.

“No, she die in Somalia,” Ahmed says.

“Oh, sorry,” I say, then flip to a picture of a Somali woman, brightly colored in scarves and dress wraps.

“Who is this?”

“His sister,” they say.

“We live together in Africa,” Ahmed says. Then he gets back to the homework. Where were we? Oh yes, monogamy.

“It is good to be with one person so you don’t spread the disease to many people,” I say, trying to explain why the homework sheet says monogamy prevents AIDS. I’m also trying not to be disrespectful of Ahmed and his father, who’s smiling with me about his photos of his polygamous family. The moment is awkward and amusing. Chechaka-Yusuf knows maybe a dozen words in English, so we smile more than normal to communicate. Yes, sir, I’m telling your son not to follow your path with women. Grin.

Personally, I can’t imagine sharing a man, or having multiple mothers, but I’m not about to launch into a lecture about my monogamous beliefs or women’s rights. Chechaka-Yusuf and Ahmed already know that polygamy is not officially allowed in this country—Mame-Yusuf is Chechaka-Yusuf’s legal wife and his second wife is considered

a single mom. Besides, it's a practice that will likely be phased out in the next generations.

Still, the middle territory between monogamy and polygamy is a little weird. What are the chances that Ahmed would have his monogamy-proclaiming homework and Chechaka-Yusuf have his family photos on the same night? I can't tell if Ahmed finds it odd. For him, it's simply another marker of the difference between cultures, something that comes up daily in school and in his homework.

During Chechaka-Alisek's visit to Pittsburgh to attempt to woo his wife back, he spent a few nights at Mame-Asha's. To prepare for her brother, Mame-Asha, along with Asha and Zeynab, made up a guest bed for him in a spare room just off the kitchen. In the summers, this was the coolest bedroom to sleep in. They spread clean sheets on the bed and provided two pillows, each covered in colorful pillowcases that Mame-Asha had embroidered herself. Zeynab swept the carpeted floors (they never did like the noise and fuss of a vacuum cleaner that was loaned to them) and Asha scrubbed the stove. She cooked rice and chicken and *ugali* porridge bread and beans.

When Chechaka-Omari arrives, the women escort him to a seat on the couch, in front of the coffee table. Asha and Zeynab bring him a bowl of cold water to rinse his fingers, an orange soda, a thermos of coffee and a cup. They serve the meat and starches. He thinks they seem like good girls—quiet, hard-working, and hospitable—and both are approaching, if not already at, marriage-age. He thinks of his teenage son in Vegas.

After he eats in silence—it is rude to disturb a guest while he or she is eating—Asha and Zeynab clear the dishes. Then, he and Mame-Asha began catching up on family

news—who is living where in the country, how their family in Somalia is holding up. Eventually, Chechaka-Asha joins after his work shift—he has a new job working for a grocery store—and the girls serve more food and drinks.

Then Chechaka-Omari proposes that one of Mame-Asha's daughters might make a good wife for his son, a boy in high school. There is talk of the botched marriage proposal between Asha and Yusuf, how Yusuf and his family wanted her to marry right away, after her sophomore year of high school. Chechaka-Omari says he understands the importance of finishing high school. He wants his son to finish high school and maybe go on to college because he'd get a better job, make more money. His son could wait for Asha, or even Zeynab.

So there in the tent room, it's decided that his son Omari will choose one of Mame-Asha's daughters. This is a good arrangement. They are cousins, by Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Omari being siblings by the same father, different mother. Cousins, especially those more distantly-related through a half-parent, are considered ideal marriage arrangements. Chechaka-Asha says he has a videocamera and he can tape the girls. Then Chechaka-Omari can take a tape home to his son and ask him to choose.

So Asha and Zeynab shower and dress in their best clothes. Asha chooses red, her favorite color. They both wear headwraps and sparkly top scarves. Then they meet in the living room. Their father puts on some east African pop music. And then he presses record on the camera. He films the girls standing against the pink wall drapes, looking serious. Asha and Zeynab look at the camera, hoping they are looking their best for a mysterious, unknown eye.

Then, slowly, they begin to dance to the music, trying to be serious, but also giggling. It's funny dancing for the camera. They shuffle back and forth, not getting *too* into it, though Zeynab occasionally exaggerates her movements in her enjoyment of dancing. Soon, it's over. There's not much else to do except wait and see what the boy thinks.

Chechaka-Omari leaves Pittsburgh soon afterwards, without his own wife. But he returns to Vegas with a possible spouse for his son.

When Omari watches the film of Asha and Zeynab dancing, he recognizes Asha's face. She's a little fatter now, having grown into more of a woman since the last time he saw her in the Kakuma camp three years ago. He remembers playing with her in a group of kids and that he'd always liked the way she laughed, the way she moved. Of course, they never really talked because he wasn't supposed to talk to any girls besides his sisters. But he remembers that Asha was cute. So he tells his father right away that he will marry her. Chechaka-Omari calls Mame-Asha and Chechaka-Asha to tell them the good news. Mame-Asha is overjoyed and exclaims to Asha that she will have a good husband, that Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, is watching over them. Later that night, Omari calls and asks to speak with his future wife. He's not exactly sure how he's supposed to talk to her, but he tries to go smooth and romantic. Asha has had many MySpace men talk to her in this way and she's not impressed.

"He called me *baby*," Asha snorts several months later when she recalls their first conversation. We're sitting across from each other at an Ethiopian restaurant,

scooping up chickpea spreads and chicken curries with thin, spongy bread. “I said, ‘I’m not your baby. I don’t even know you.’” Her voice is bold and bullish.

Tonight she ventured out without a headscarf and her hair is big and flared. Instead of parting her hair vertically like she normally does, she’s parted it horizontally into two sections—one above her ears and one below. Each section is gathered into a ponytail. The ponytails are clamped with plastic claw clips and her hair flares out of them like ladies’ fans. Lately, she hasn’t been weaving her hair into her usual braids that lay flat on her head. At home, she’s been letting her hair spring naturally into big afros.

She continues her story about her first conversation with her fiancé. “Then he ask me if I can spend my whole life with him! And I say, ‘I don’t know. How can I know that?’” She twists her chin toward her shoulder, smirks, and shakes her head.

“He asked if I love him! I said, ‘I cannot love you now. I don’t even know you.’ I told him to send me pictures. So he sent me pictures and I remembered him from Kakuma. And now we talk on the phone all the time. And now I really love him. Y-e-a-h,” she says, relaxing into a smile. She scoops up more of the curries that have been plopped around a large plate between us.

“Hey, we cook this same food,” Asha says when she tastes a mixture of chopped collard greens and cheese.

“Yeah, I thought some of the food would be similar,” I say.

“Why do they cook this here?”

“It’s an Ethiopian restaurant. They cook food from Ethiopia.”

“What is Ethiopia?”

“It’s a country right next to Somalia. You probably know it by a different name. But it’s right next to Somalia. It’s in Africa.”

“Oh.”

This fall, Asha has settled into a new routine. Every morning, she wakes up at 4 a.m. and calls Omari before he goes to bed on West Coast time. Both of them have hosts of pestering siblings and nosy parents and they have more privacy in the night hours. She talks to him for an hour before showering, then heads to the corner to wait for a city bus. The 13D comes at 5:45 a.m. She takes it downtown, where she transfers to the subway for a train that will take her to the South Hills. When she gets off the T, she waits for a yellow school bus to pick her up and drive her across the busy road to her high school. She’s always at school an hour before the homeroom bell rings, so she usually goes to her desk and puts her head down for a short nap.

Asha is the only Somali Bantu girl at Brashear, one of two high schools in the city that have focused ESL programs. Since her family lives in Manchester, the school has routed her to the high school where most of the Mexican-American ESL students in the city study. It’s now the fourth school that she’s attended during her four years of education in the U.S. Generally, things seem to be better than when she was harassed by all the teens in her own Somali Bantu community. At Brashear, she mainly keeps to herself. She occasionally talks about one friend, a girl from Mexico. One night she outlined this conversation that she had with a boy in one of her classes:

Asha—“Can you help me?”

African American Boy—“I don’t help African people.”

Asha—"I came here to learn. My mom told me to go to school and learn."

African American Boy—"Yeah, 'cause you're a Black African."

Asha—"Yeah? What color are you? Tell me. You are dark."

African American Boy—"Do you want to suck my dick?"

Asha—"You can have your sister suck your dick."

Then Asha continued to complain about how this boy and others slept through class or listened to their iPods or played with their cell phones. No one listened to the teachers. "I hate all the students at school," she said.

The brightest part of her days has been a metalworking class, where she's been making jewelry, like rings and bracelets. Crafting concrete objects makes her feel proud and accomplished. She really likes art class. When she was kicked out of the after-school program for not doing enough homework and talking too much with her girlfriend and sometimes other boys, she eagerly signed up for an after-school art program at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild near her house. She had just learned about it, so the timing was fortuitous. She switched from one program to another.

The guild has been helping teens to gain confidence in themselves through pottery and other arts classes for several decades. Founded by Bill Strickland, a local African American business executive who won America's prestigious "genius" award from the MacArthur Foundation in 1996, the guild also offers job training programs in specific fields—like greenhouse horticulture (students now grow all of the orchids that are sold in local Pittsburgh grocery stores) and healthcare tech jobs (the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is the region's largest employer). The program has been so successful that Strickland has founded similar guilds in San Francisco and even in Israel.



Over the years I've been encouraging Chechaka-Asha and other Somali Bantus to go there. It's walking distance from Chechaka-Asha's house, but he would have to pass underneath the I-65 highway bridge, a space that seems sketchy during the day, and even more shady at night. He seemed hesitant when I pointed down the end of his street, toward the highway, and explained how close it was. Even though he's a newcomer to Manchester, he, too, feels the divide that the highway created in the neighborhood. When residents protested the highway several decades ago, they raised these fears, but officials promised that there would be links between the bisected areas, that there would still be walkways underneath the highways. But, really, who wants to walk underneath a highway?

When Asha attends the art program at the guild, a school bus drops her off at home afterwards. Her father told her that it was too dangerous to walk.

Art has been a part of Zeynab's life lately, too. She's been taking an art class at her middle school. When her teacher announced that they would be creating T-shirts in a printmaking workshop, she decided to make a gift for her sister. Every once in awhile, Asha wears the gift, a T-shirt with a photo of herself on the front and a photo of her fiancé on the back. He's wearing an oversized T-shirt, shrugging to the side. Zeynab created a caption for his photo: "my baby Omari."

"I make it for her," Zeynab said proudly the first time I complimented Asha on her T-shirt.

After enough phone conversations and picture exchanges, Asha is now comfortable with the term, "baby." And she's ok with calling him "baby," too.

At the Ethiopian restaurant, Asha explains that she likes the marriage arrangement with Omari because she will be able to finish high school.

“After I get my diploma, I will move to Las Vegas,” she says. “And I will go to college there. His parents say they will help me.”

“Do you think you will like Las Vegas?”

“Yeah, I think so. It is hot there. But I like Pittsburgh. And I like my family. But I can’t stay here. Girls have to move with their husbands because mothers and daughters can’t live together.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s why Yusuf and his wife from Ohio didn’t stay married, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, she was stupid. I don’t know why she not want to move. She stay with her mother.”

For a few moments, we eat in silence. The restaurant is loud as people shout out their conversations.

“I don’t want to get married because then I will have a baby and I won’t be able to go to school,” she says quietly.

“Aww, Asha, you don’t have to have a baby right away. You can take birth control pills or get depo shots or something.”

“Yeah, I know,” she sighs. The problem is that contraception is taboo. Elder Somali Bantus encourage young couples to have babies within the first year of their marriage. In some cases, back in Somalia, men would divorce wives if they didn’t have a baby in the first year because he assumed she was infertile and would not bring him a big family.

“Omari, he buy me whatever I want,” Asha says in a bragging voice now, changing the subject. “For Amina’s wedding—Are you going to Amina’s wedding? It’s in May I think. I will tell you when. But she is getting married to the boy who put that spell on Arbai.”

“Your cousin Arbai in Buffalo?”

“Yeah, you remember, he make her fall on the bed?” she says, narrowing her eyes as she reveals this juicy gossip-news.

“Yes.”

“Yeah, well that boy is marrying Amina now,” she says of one of the Pittsburgh girls. Amina was the first Somali Bantu girl in Pittsburgh to earn her high school diploma and has been studying at the community college.

“And for her wedding, all the clothes I’m going to wear, he buy,” she says, sweeping her hand around her face to indicate the scarves that she’ll wrap around her, scarves paid for by her fiancé.

“He said he would buy me a cell phone, but I say, ‘No, I don’t need one. That is too much money.’ After we get married, maybe he can buy me a cell phone,” she says, revealing some maturity of the fact that he doesn’t make enough money for everything. Though he and his family are paying a hefty sum to Chechaka-Asha and Mame-Asha for her hand. The bride price has increased since Yusuf paid \$4,000 for his wife several years ago. Omari, with some financial help from his father and aunts and uncles, will be sending a lump sum of \$6,500.

“Oh, you know my ex-boyfriend in Seattle? He keep calling me and his mother take his cell phone away from him, ah hahaha,” she laughs. “He keeps calling and say he

want to marry me even though I am engaged to Omari. His mother say, 'you are stupid, she is marrying another man.' So she take his phone away, ah hahaha.”

Asha leans on the table and puts her face in her elbow as she continues to laugh. Her body shakes and belly aches. Then she sits up and brushes her hairline back with a goofy smile. Her hair fans an extra six inches around her head. She is young and confused and hopeful. This summer, she'll see Omari for the first time in four years. She prays that she likes him.

## Chapter 12

### The Musical

In the back of Sally's minivan, Asha and Tukera sit side-by-side in silence. Ever since the marriage proposal between Yusuf and Asha fell through, the girls haven't talked much. We're driving to a theater to see *High School Musical 3*, a teen romance movie. Tukera's 11-year-old sister and Zeynab are also riding along. The quiet is awkward. The year before, Asha and Tukera chatted and gossiped and laughed the whole ride when we went to a party just for high school girls at the home of one of the Pittsburgh volunteers.

At the theater, Sally purchases the tickets and the girls pick out snacks. We get popcorn and starbursts and sour gummy worms. In the auditorium, the four girls sit in the row in front of Sally and me. On screen, basketball players begin singing a musical song in the middle of an intense court game. The girls laugh loudly and whoop in Kizigua at the movie. We have to remind them that there are other people in the theater, too.

This is one of many “girls’ night out” events that Pittsburgh volunteers have coordinated for Somali Bantu teens. Every time, the girls’ brothers complain that no one is hosting any boys’ parties for them. Usually, we volunteers admit our bias. “I’m a girl and I want to hang out with just girls,” we all say.

The vast majority of people who volunteer with the Pittsburgh Somali Bantus are women. Almost all are White. And most are middle-aged moms. Sometimes we women drag our husbands or boyfriends along to hang out with the families and play soccer or help with homework. And a few male students at the nearby University of Pittsburgh have gotten involved with a predominantly women’s volunteer organization, Keep it Real, which was founded specifically to help tutor Somali Bantu refugees.

It seems all the Pittsburgh volunteers are just keeping with tradition. Throughout U.S. history, helping immigrant populations to adapt to American culture has been a woman’s role. In the past century, this providence was even more pronounced with the early 20th-century Americanization movement. When the United States entered World War I after a long period of isolation, the nation began to question its identity: How do we present ourselves to Europeans? What is America? Who are Americans?

The variety of ethnic populations in the United States made it difficult to answer those identity questions. Thousands of immigrants from all over the world had moved to

the U.S. since the 1880s. Americanization was a movement to naturalize these new residents, teach them English, and teach them American ways of living and thinking—like being obsessive about cleanliness. At the onset of World War I, many states passed legislation and allocated budget money to fund education and Americanization for immigrants. Women were at the helm of the on-the-ground movement. It was up to schoolteachers and female civic groups, which set up patriotic programs for the newcomers, to create a new home and identity for the United States. These days, it's still women who are doing much of the work of welcoming immigrants by showing them how to use vacuum cleaners and taking their daughters out to tame movies like *High School Musical 3*.

At a home in Squirrel Hill, a neighborhood with considerable more wealth than Manchester or Lawrenceville, dozens of people mingle in a high-ceilinged living room and dining room at a Tea & Wine Party thrown for “all the wonderful people who volunteer with the Pittsburgh Somali Bantu community.” The Americans who regularly attend the Saturday morning association meetings are here, along with some who stopped volunteering when the families they knew moved to Omaha. Sally conceived of this party as a way to gather strangers who share a commonality as friends of Somali Bantus. Only three men are present, college guys who are part of the tutoring program. The rest are chatty women. Over cheese and grapes and other appetizers, the women introduce themselves and ask each other how they got involved with “the Somalis.”

Everyone has an official story—her church or synagogue or university group was looking for people to volunteer and she just happened to sign up. And everyone has a

second, hidden story, too—there was that trip to Indonesia that made her see the world in a new way, or that adventure in that poor Caribbean town that made her think she should dedicate more time to her community at home. The vast majority of the women are well-traveled and consider themselves global citizens, women who try to keep a little international flavor in their lives. And there's a third story, too—the love story of how they were just so endeared to *their* family the first time they met them. Their Somali Bantu family, you know, has such an incredible history, and the women work so hard to keep everything together, and *my god* they have *such cute* children.

After an hour or so of chit-chat, Sally encourages all 25 people to everyone to squeeze into the living room—on couch arms and floor rugs—for a little pow-wow. I sit on a stool in front of the fireplace. Slowly, under Sally's direction, each person tells the official story of how they got involved, a joyful story of their volunteer experience, and a concern.

“So, I knew two families. They were just wonderful,” says a woman with dyed-blond, wavy hair who looks like she hasn't quite left the '80s decade. “And I worked so hard with them. But then they moved to Omaha, and my heart was just broken. I haven't started with another family yet, but this meeting is making me think that I should.”

“I'm Jewish, so with my family, we talk a lot about what it's like to practice a minority religion here,” says a woman with long, black hair. She's sitting in a sofa chair. “And we talk about what you do about food. You know, how I keep kosher, how they keep *halal*,” she says, referring to religious dietary restrictions.

“I'm concerned because they have so many babies. Soo, many babies,” a stern rail-of-a-woman with thick glasses says. Others nod or hum *mmm-hmm* in agreement.



“I got involved with the Refugee Center just before the families were coming,” a woman with bouncy orange hair says from her spot on a piano bench. “Some of you know Ralia, from the first family to be resettled in Pittsburgh—she was supposed to go to Prospect Park [the Catholic Charities refugee campus]. But they decided to change things at the last minute. And so she had to spend the first night in a convent. She told me a story about how she was so afraid. She was so afraid of those pictures on the wall, which I think were crucifixes or something. I mean, if you haven’t had much exposure to Christianity, a White guy hanging on a cross and bleeding from his ribs is a pretty graphic thing to see, especially given where she was coming from.”

“So, I don’t know if any of you have done this, but you should really construct a family tree with your family,” says a mom who brings her husband and kids on most of her visits. She’s sitting on the floor, leaning her arm on a coffee table. “I did it with mine and it was so much fun! It was really informative, too, because they have such huge, huge families and I can’t keep track of all their brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles.” She pauses. Some women grab another handful of pretzels or take another sip of their tea.

“Oh,” she continues, “One of my concerns: When I see those cockroaches on the wall. Oh. Oh, God. I wish they could get better housing.”

“Yeah, I hate the cockroaches,” another woman adds. “It’s so hard to get rid of those things. I bought my family a whole bunch of poison traps and stuff, but none of it seems to work.”

In a corner near a fireplace, two staffers from a women’s hospital talk about how they’ve been leading a health program for high school girls. Many of their activities are self-esteem and teamwork building exercises—like climbing through ropes courses. The

program is being run on a federal grant and the program has gone so well that they hope to receive another grant next year.

“Have you talked to the girls about birth control?” a woman, the host of the party, asks the two hospital staffers.

“Yeah, we cover it in a class on sexuality,” one of the women says.

“Because that’s really important,” the hosts says. She has short, boat-shaped gray hair. Everyone in the room nods in agreement and hail-hails the comment. It seems the most important element of Americanization for many of us is to promote birth control and family planning.

“Yeah, my family has seven kids, seven kids!” a woman exclaims. I consider jumping in to add that Mame-Yusuf has 10 children, but the round-the-room has continued.

“Um, so I’m from the Pitt tutors,” a guy with too-long hair says. “One of the best things I’ve done is help the association to put up a Web site. It’s not anything too professional, but you should check it out sometime. It’s [pittsburghsomalibantu-dot-org](http://pittsburghsomalibantu-dot-org). And I like hanging out with the families. The kids are fun to play with. And the dads are cool. They don’t really talk much. We just chill on the couch and drink orange soda. Gotta love that orange soda,” he says, laughing. The whole room erupts into claps and hoots over the orange soda. Besides wall drapes, and an abundance of small children, one of the most distinctive things about the Somali Bantus is their love of orange soda. It’s held in high-esteem and reserved for guests, men, and holidays. It’s the standard gift they present to volunteers when they visit.

“I’m really worried about gang influences,” another one of the college guys adds. “And the fact that they don’t get along well with the other African American kids at school.”

“Pffff, yeah that’s a real problem,” a woman says extra loudly from a couch. She doesn’t expand on her comment.

“Maybe we could set up some sessions after school for the Somali Bantu and African American kids to get together,” another woman offers. “Like that ropes course you were talking about,” she says acknowledging the women from the hospital program.

“This is just wonderful,” Sally says, addressing the room. “Look at how many of us are here, supporting our Somali friends. It’s so good to know that there are so many of us who care. Does anyone have any other suggestions for things we could do together to help improve things for them?”

“What about a scholarship fund for college?” someone suggests.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

“I bet enough of us have connections that we could get something set up,” Sally says.

“We should also work on helping them to self-sufficiency,” says a twenty-something woman who used to be an assistant at the Pittsburgh Refugee Center and occasionally keeps in touch with the families she became friends with. “I know some families have been relying on their volunteer to write their utility bills or go grocery shopping,” she says, not pointing anyone out, but making a general statement. “I had to cover for a family after their volunteer couldn’t commit to helping them anymore. They didn’t know how to write their bills or anything, and they’d been here for two years! Two

years! No wonder the volunteer left. She was probably burnt out. The daughter was the only one in the family who could really write, and she told me she couldn't do these bills. But I sat her down and said, 'you can do this. Let me show you.' She was fine after a month or two. You've got to let the families figure things out on their own. Tell them to take the bus to the grocery store. Be a guide, but don't do everything for them."

"I worry about those eldest daughters," one woman says. "I mean, they have to do everything. Cook for the family. Watch their brothers and sisters. Wash the house. Can we convince the families to share more of the work?"

"Yeah, that's why we've had some parties just for high school girls," Sally says. "So they can get out of the house and have some fun together without worrying about homework or all those things in the house. They deserve the break."

A few months before, fifteen of the local high school girls had gathered in this same English-looking living room for a party. Someone brought a video from the most recent Pittsburgh wedding, and the girls put it in the VCR. It flashed on the large television. The bride was present and most of the girls who were present were in the video, dancing in the line. Although the Americans had laid out a spread of fresh fruit and rice and baked macaroni and cheese, the girls hardly nibbled on the food.

"Turn it up! Turn it up!" One girl shouted about the wedding video. She wanted to hear the dance music. They BLASTED it as though we were in a club. Then, they formed a circle in the living room. They shook and shimmied and whooped a lot more than in the video on screen where they danced conservatively in the female line. Some removed their headscarves and wrapped them around their waists. Others whipped their scarves in the air, dancing with the motion of the airwaves. Asha and Fatuma were among them.

At one point, the husband of the woman hosting the party peeked into his living room that had turned into something of a nightclub for teen Somali girls. He quickly retreated back to the kitchen where he'd been relegated to watching the Steelers football game on a mini-TV.

In the movie theater, Zeynab is dancing in her seat in the dark, while the actors in *High School Musical 3* dance on screen. The other girls bop their heads and shift in their seats, but Zeynab is going wild. Sally taps her shoulder. "Hey, hey," she whispers. Zeynab sits motionless against the seat for a few seconds, then starts to groove a little again.

Afterwards, in the car, the girls talk about which actors they liked the best. Zeynab liked the blond boy. The other girls say they like the curly-haired Black guy. Sally says she liked him, too.

"No, he's mine, you can't have him!" Asha shouts, and everyone laughs. There's a bit more chatter about the movie, but then the girls are silent and they don't speak to each other in Kizigua.

After we drop Tukera and her sister off, Asha talks about how hard school is and how she's giving it one more chance and then she's done. It's hard, she has to get up so early for the buses, and she doesn't really get along with anyone.

"I want to die," she says suddenly, two blocks from the Manchester Block.

"Asha, don't talk that way!" Sally exclaims. "There are so many wonderful things happening in your life." When the girls get out of the car, Sally gives Asha an extra big hug.

“Pfff, I’ll call the school counselor on Monday,” Sally sighs when we get back into the car and head to our homes in Squirrel Hill. Asha isn’t the first of the Somali Girls to deal with depression. Sally knows some other girls who have struggled, too. And Asha’s suicide words and tone mimicked almost exactly what Tukera said to me two years ago. This trend is one of the reasons why the staffers at the women’s hospital program focused on self-esteem building for the girls.

Asha was born into a world of uncertainty, a refugee camp where she couldn’t claim a home in the country of her parents, nor the home of the nation where she was living. Then she moved to a country where everything was new and fun and hard all at the same time. She must move to Las Vegas in a few years, to marry a man she hasn’t seen since he was a boy. How does she know she’ll like him? And will she go to college? On the phone lines, women have been telling Mame-Asha that Asha can’t go to college in Nevada because she went to high school in Pennsylvania. True, she might not be eligible for the same scholarship money, but she could still go to college. Asha suspects these women are lying, lying for no good reason. And how will she get into college anyway? She still has trouble with basic reading and basic math. How will she become an art teacher or a nurse? When will she get to see her family when she’s living in Vegas? Will she never see Mame-Asha again, the way Mame-Asha will never see her parents again?

Several weeks later, after Asha has been seeing a school counselor and devoting herself more to her jewelry class, she reveals a new plan for her future.

“I’m going to move to Nairobi,” she says of Kenya’s capital city. “Because people here, when you die, they cut inside you and take everything out. We see it on

TV!” When I explain that doctors need permission to do autopsies and that it would be possible to arrange for appropriate funeral arrangements, she doesn’t seem to care.

“I want to go to Nairobi because our people are there. I’m going to tell my husband I want us to move to Nairobi. Here, there is no good Qur’an school. My brothers, they don’t know Qur’an. My father has to teach them. But in Nairobi, our Africa people are there. And Nairobi is a good city. You can still have a nice house and things like here.” The irony, of course, is that the people her family escaped from were there. But maybe she heard that things had changed, that there were new opportunities there. Or maybe it was better to struggle at the bottom of a society that valued some of the same elements that she did.

“*Y-e-a-h*, I’m going to Nairobi,” she said with conviction.

## Chapter 13

### Sixteen

On a Saturday in December, Asha leans her hand against the kitchen wall and poses for a camera.

“Smile, Asha, it’s your birthday!” Ali yells before he takes the picture. Although he’s the sort of kid who would say that as a joke, it really is Asha’s birthday. She’s 16. For the first time, her family is celebrating her birthday.

For the camera, Asha gives a half-genuine picture smile, cocking her head slightly toward her shoulder. She wears a pink tee, big silver hoop earrings, and a long



necklace she made in art class with a pendant that hangs near her belly button. The pendant is a rectangle with her name written on it in English.

Behind her is a collage of giant clown stickers that she and Zeynab recently decorated the kitchen wall with. Many of the clowns are wacking bass drums or snare drums on parade. There must be 100 of them, sparkly little guys with big red lips who are grinning and raising their eyebrows.

“Ok, ok, Asha, do something funny,” Ali suggests. He’s barefoot, wearing black jeans and a gray shirt with a single white stripe across his chest. “Yeah, yeah, like that!” he yells as she squats to the side and puts her hand up like she’s making a gang sign. Her “symbol” is two bunny-ear fingers pointing toward her cheeks. She smiles with a big grin when Ali takes this shot.

Her hair is pulled tightly against her head in a short bun in the back. The camera flash reflects off her broad forehead. No studs grace her nose. There’s only a bumpy scar. The piercing got infected a couple months ago and though she tried to clean it and cover it up with studs that didn’t sit so far in her nose, but she finally had to take any jewelry out completely. Now the hole has closed up and there’s a little bump on her nose that looks like a blackhead pimple.

When Ali shows her the picture of herself on the digital camera, she’s pleased.

“For my baby Omari,” she says. “*Y-e-a-h*, I will send these to my fiancé.” Then:

“Ali, give me the camera. I want to take pictures.”

He runs back into the living room where his younger brothers are waiting to eat cake. It’s sitting in a big, plastic container on the tall dining table, just above their heads.

The cake is the central prize of this birthday party. There are no balloons or games or presents at this affair. Simply acknowledging the date and saying “Happy Birthday” is festive, and the cake, well the cake makes it a party.

In the kitchen, Asha decides to take just one photo: Of the stove where she does so much daily work. The white, metal surface of the stove is clean under the gas burners, a result of Mame-Asha’s cleanliness commands. On the burners are two pots. One is a big, family-size soup pot with a mismatched lid on top. The other is a medium-sauce pan with a lid set upside-down—the handle of the lid is inside of the pot. Inside the pots are rice and chicken, dishes that Asha has prepared for dinner.

When she finishes taking her picture, she scoops the food into bowls—a giant one for her siblings, and two small ones for herself and me. Then she brings them into the pink tent-room, setting the big bowl on the floor and the small bowls on the coffee table. Mame-Asha is on the love seat, concentrating on her embroidery. Chechaka-Asha is working at the grocery store. He’s been quite busy lately. This fall, he was voted vice president of the Somali Bantu community association.

Asha and I sit on the couch while Zeynab and the boys gather around the bowl on the floor. Normally, Asha eats with them, but it’s her birthday! Tonight she gets to eat on the couch, a place of honor.

“Mmm, don’t eat too much,” Ali warns his brothers while the boys grab for clumps of rice and chicken with their hands. “We’re gonna eat cake!”

Zeynab, her brothers, and I baked the cake at my house earlier this afternoon. The oven in their kitchen stopped working two years ago, which didn’t matter much because Asha only cooks on the stovetops. We only discovered it wasn’t working after we carved

a pumpkin for Halloween and I attempted to show them how to roast pumpkin seeds. Though the dials were turned, the heat never came on. Now they use the oven for storage.

At my house, Zeynab and I mixed the batter for the chocolate cake while her brothers played with the Wii boxing videogame in my living room. Zeynab boxed a few rounds when the cake was baking and cooling. Then she spread globs of hot pink frosting on the cake. We baked it in a bunt-pan, so it was shaped liked a doughnut. Then the boys helped to dump sprinkles on top and we counted out 16 candles.

When we returned to the Manchester Block, Asha was napping on the couch in the tent-room.

After dinner, Asha sits at the dining table in front of the cake. Her siblings all crowd around her, climbing on her and the wooden chair to peek at the pink dessert. Ebra gets as close as he can and blindly flings his hand in the direction of the cake, trying to grab it.

“It’s so beautiful,” Zeynab says, admiring her handiwork. While I light the candles, I tell Zeynab to keep Ebra away so he doesn’t burn his hand. Then we sing “Happy Birthday,” a song everyone has learned at school when their classmates celebrate their special days.

At age 16, Asha is now eligible to get her nose pierced, apply for a driver’s permit, or get married. She’s finally old enough to earn a few public rights.

After we remove the candles and Asha is about to slice the cake—

WOOMPF! Ebra finally wriggles close enough and smashes his little brown hand into a side of the cake, flattening an entire section.

“Hahahahahaha!! Ebra!!!” All the kids laugh hysterically and Ebra, standing with his baby belly pushed out a little bit, looks at the goo on his hand. Ali explains to his mother what happened.

“Ah?” she says, shaking her head. “Oh, Ebra.”

Everyone gets a slice of the cake except Mame-Asha, who doesn’t eat it because of her diabetes. Later, when the cake is gone, Hamadi lugs a black bag from the bedrooms down to the tent-room. Mame-Asha opens it up and zips through her routine. She pulls her up her dirac and stabs an insulin-filled syringe into her thigh, which Asha filled with exactly 20 ml of insulin. Then she checks her blood level and writes it down on a notebook. She writes it herself, without any hesitation. Then she puts the notebook and pen, and all her medical implements back in the bag. She returns to her sewing.

Asha and Zeynab are in the kitchen cleaning up. Asha’s been seeing a counselor and seems to be looking forward to her future again. She often talks about moving to Las Vegas and going to college. When she’s finished with the dishes, she returns to the tent-room and settles in on the couch. Then she pulls her hair out of its bun and uncrunches it. She leans forward and smoothes it from the back, then continues pulling it out into an afro from her head. It’s big and bold and fun.

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